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Hunger, Place and Seasonality: Understanding Monga Vulnerability in Northwest Bangladesh

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Department of Geography
Durham University
United Kingdom

September, 2013

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Mohammad Nayeem Aziz Ansari
September, 2013

Abstract

This research sets out to understand risk and resilience from the perspective of very vulnerable households in Rangpur region of northwest Bangladesh, who are exposed to the Monga. The local term ‘Monga’ is defined as seasonal hunger and food insecurity or most commonly a famine-like situation that hits every year in two spells: the severe period during the Bengali months of *Ashwin* – *Kartik* (Mid September – Mid November), and the less severe one from *Chaitra* – *Baishak* (Mid March – Mid May). A group of people, particularly female headed households, agriculture wage labourers, marginal and small scale deficit farmers are the most Monga affected due primarily to seasonal unemployment and lack of cash, related with the local single to two rice crop economy that is entirely inadequate to meet their needs in those two periods. The Monga situation is more severe some years because of wide scale impact of natural disasters like floods, riverbank erosion, drought and, the worst situation is to be found on the river (*char*) islands. Recent Monga severity suggests that the situation is not markedly different from what it was. Situating this seasonal hunger, the research argues that the interpretation of Monga is not independent of an understanding of the socio-economic, political and their relational interactions that ultimately configure and reconfigure it. The research motivation thus derives from the need to examine Monga vulnerability and so deepen our insights into the seasonal hunger and food insecurity experiences of the affected households. This thesis explores the underlying multiple factors that (re)shapes food vulnerability at the household level and, how the affected households cope with and how their strategies are played out in their own particular risk and resilience contexts. Eventually, it aims to create a new vocabulary around the old problem of the Monga by examining how Monga vulnerability contributes to chronic poverty and food insecurity at the household level and vice-versa.

This research is entirely qualitative in nature. Empirical evidence was collected from five villages in the Rangpur region and associated GO-NGO sources using different ethnographic and qualitative methods. The findings highlight that the Monga predisposes the households to multi-sphere experiences of hunger (i.e. qualitative, quantitative and physiological) and poverty. It is not just one consequence of income poverty; rather, the social and livelihood mechanisms of poor households are dysfunctional, multiply rooted in their entitlements, capabilities, their ways of living and coping, and the negotiations they have with the complex network of institutions that affect households both singly and synergistically. The macroeconomic constraints limit the political economy choices at the micro level and the existence of Monga can be explained by the limited, inadequate and indifferent performance of the different actors that reproduce poverty and chronic food insecurity. The present research reveals that breaking the recurrence of Monga requires its repoliticisation. Important factors in this regard are the establishment of food rights and an increase in household resilience.

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List of Abbreviations

BARI	Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BD TK	Bangladeshi Taka (BD Tk122 is approximately equal to UK £1, based on 13 August, 2013)
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development
BINP	Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BSS	Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha
BUP	Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad
BUP	Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad
CDMP	Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme
CEGIS	Center for Environmental and Geographic Information
CFW	Cash-For-Work (programme)
CIP	Country Investment Plan
CLP	Chars Livelihood Programme
CPR	Common Property Resources
DAE	Department of Agricultural Extension
DeLPHE	Development Partner of Higher Education
DFID	Department For International Development
DoLR	Department of Land Record
EU	European Union
FAO	Food And Agriculture Organization
FAP	Flood Action Plan
FFW	Food For Work (programme)
GFSUPW	Gaibandha Food Security project for Ultra-Poor Women
GNI	Gross National Income
GO	Governmental Organisaition
GoB	Government People's Republic of Bangladesh
GUK	Gram Unnayan Kendro
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
HIV/AIDs	Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection / Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
HYV	High Yielding Varieties

ICCO	Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation Formally it was Interchurch Coordination Committee For Development Projects
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IGA	Income Generating Activities
IGVGD–TUP	Income Generation for Vulnerable Group Development–Targeting The Ultra-Poor Programme
InM	Institute of Micro Finance
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute
JP	Jatiya Party
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MMB	Monga Mukto Bangladesh
MoEF	Ministry of Environment And Forest
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MT	Metric Ton
NBI	North Bangle Institute
NFP	National Food Policy
NFPE	Non-Formal Primary Education
NGO	Non-Government Organisations
NNP	National Nutrition Programme
OMS	Open Market Sales
PEM	Protein-Energy Malnutrition
PETRRRA	Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance
PKSF	Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation
POs	Partner Orgnisaitons
PRIME	Programmed Initiative For Monga Eradication
PRSPs	Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers
RDRS	Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service
RIB	Research Initiatives, Bangladesh
RNF	Rural Non Farm (activities)
SDR	Short Duration Rice (varieties)
SSNPs	Social Safety-Net Programmes
UAO	Upazila Agriculture Officer
UFO	Upazila Food Officer
UN	United Naiton

UNDP	United Nation Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
UP	Union Parishad
USAID	United States Agency For International Developm
USS	Udayankur Sheba Sangstha
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VGF	Vulnerable Group Feeding
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WRC	Wheat Research Centre
WRI	World Resources Institute
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
DER	Disaster and Emergency Responses Group

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Although food in/security has long been a conceptual centrepiece for both academics and policy makers, it is one of the most ‘abject and widespread problems’ to face the poor all over the world (Ciani, 2012: 2). FAO’s statistics¹ in 2012 show that about 870 million poor people do not have enough to eat, and among them 98% live in developing countries (FAO, 2012). Over the past couple of decades international concern about food security, particularly in term of famine and hunger, has slowly shifted from Asia to Africa because there have been rapid strides in agricultural production in many Asian countries and a reduced dependence on imported cereals (Falcon *et al.*, 1987). It is important to note here that the largest absolute number of vulnerable people remains in Asia² and they still depend on the adequacy of the policy responses to the terrible problems of both seasonal hunger and chronic starvation (Sen, 1997). The present thesis seeks to review the issue of seasonal food insecurity and hunger in Bangladesh. Though it has been observed, and rightly so, that, while famine has of late become a recurrent feature in some parts of Africa, Bangladesh has successfully avoided a recurrence of famine since 1974 (Osmani, 1997), and we might add that the country has achieved adequate and relatively stable levels of food supplies and prices notwithstanding its vulnerability to seasonal hunger and the fact that undernourishment remains chronic, affecting a range of vulnerable groups in pockets of several poverty-ridden regions. Reaching these people – as opposed to disaster or famine victims – has proved to be intractable, often due to a lack of in-depth understanding about the contemporary nature of vulnerability from the household’s point of view and due to the ineffectiveness, and to some extent, the failure of policies and programmes. The question of food security is yet riddled with paradoxical challenges. The focus of this thesis is an examination of household vulnerability to the Monga - a century long old problem of seasonal food insecurity and hunger in northwest Bangladesh, which has caught public interest and national policy agendas conceptualised as a ‘famine-like situation’. The thesis also illustrates how Monga vulnerability contributes to chronic poverty and food insecurity at the household level and vice-versa.

¹ See, *The state of food security in the World*, 2012 of FAO.

² According to the FAO, the hungry population in Asia and the Pacific is about 578 million, Sub-Saharan Africa is 239 million, and Latin America and the Caribbean is 53 million. The FAO’s report of *the state of food security in the world, 2012* shows that two-thirds of the world’s hungry live in just seven countries: Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ethiopia

1.2 Research background

1.2.1. Seasonal hunger as a development issue

The phenomenology of seasonal food insecurity and hunger in many agrarian societies is well established (Payne, 1989). It has long been documented that in economically depressed and ecologically vulnerable areas in developing countries, particularly in areas of only one major crop harvest in a year, the lack of employment may sharply deteriorate in the pre-harvest months and lead to large seasonal variations in income levels (see, Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey 1981; Chaudhuri and Paxson, 2001; Dercon and Krishnan 2000; Paxson 1993). Along with unstable incomes, a lack of proper credit markets and non-credit factors such as increases in food prices on the open market, the absence of labour opportunities, and the lack of precautionary saving (Chaudhuri and Paxson 2001; Paxson, 1993) may impede smooth consumption. Affected households are forced to reduce both the diversity and quantity of food they eat, setting the stage for nutrient deficiencies (Ogbu, 1973) and associated diseases and other illnesses (Sahn, 1989). Seasonality enters into all dimensions of food systems – patterns of food acquisition, cultural preferences, rules for social distribution, and the evolution of consumption (Messer, 1989). In response to annual seasonality, households adopt various coping strategies, from going hungry to selling assets or migrating to urban centres. In sum, seasonal hunger induced by agricultural seasonality is a characteristic feature of rural poverty and its effect may be so strong as to extend year-round. Different regions have various terms for this hungry period, such as ‘los meses flacos’ (the thin months) in coffee-growing communities around the world – from Nicaragua to Rwanda to Sumatra; ‘septi-hambre’ (hungry September) in Morelos, Mexico; ‘the month of the big stomachs’ (hungry August) among the Iteso people of Eastern Uganda; and, the ‘Monga’ in Northwest Bangladesh. Governments and different actors across the world have taken and implemented a wide array of policies and programmes that have proven successful in lessening the severity of seasonal hunger to varying degrees. Some of the actions have been implemented for decades and some are more recent. These measures can be arranged into categories such as agricultural diversification, emergency assistance, social protection safety nets, and rural livelihoods development (Devereux, Vaitla and Swan, 2008).

However, despite the well-known reasons “why seasons matter” (Chambers, 1982), finding proven solutions (Vaitla, Devereux, and Swan, 2009) to food insecurity in agrarian dominated rural societies remains a challenging development issue. Earlier, Chambers (1983) noted seasonal hunger as a new ‘professional frontier’ and recent literature has emphasised it as an ‘issue of neglect’ (Vaitla, Devereux, and Swan, 2009), a ‘forgotten reality’ (Khandker, 2011), or that ‘seasonality is unseen,’ arguing that it is often overlooked in discourses on food insecurity. Academic analyses have dealt with famine more than with seasonal hunger. And

studies on seasonality have emphasized diverse topics like seasonal labour use, wages, patterns of vital events, nutrition and energy needs, and the ecology of disease and community responses, but have often missed the subjective experiences of hunger. As famine crises in Africa have led to the realisation that the roots of food insecurity lie in the conditions of access to food rather than in its availability (Sen, 1981; Swift, 1989) and to entitlement failure (Sen, 1981), few studies have particularly focused on seasonal cyclic variability in entitlements (Chisholm and Tyers, 1982). Most recent researches have focused on the constraints to consumption smoothing, and we can perhaps reasonably claim that the literature remains rather unconsolidated.

It is often asserted that lack of public awareness and ineffectiveness of programme implementation to address seasonal hunger may be in part due to the way that chronic poverty is typically measured. Standard national poverty statistics often do not consider seasonal hunger in their official data collection and analysis and it is often difficult to find any direct way to determine how many of the “bottom billion,” as economist Paul Collier refers to the world’s poorest people, suffer from seasonal hunger (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). Thus there has no specific data on the global absolute number of seasonal hungry poor.³ A large proportion of the seasonally food insecure poor are “invisible” to the national and international poverty and annual consumption statistics used to address chronic poverty. This implies the exclusion of real victims under many programmes aimed at lessening seasonal poverty and combating hunger.

Another issue is that there is not enough emphasis on the possibility of seasonal hunger persisting because of policy failures to address the problem adequately. With a huge success in reducing the seasonal hunger in many parts of the world through agricultural diversification due to recent technological breakthroughs, yet seasonal hunger persists among the rural poor in pockets scattered throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, owing primarily to the seasonality of agriculture. Seasonal hunger often falls through a gap created by government, actors and donors dealing principally with one-off emergencies (IRIN, 2009). In an interview Devereux noted that “anti-poverty programmes deal with chronic hunger and poverty and emergency programmes deal with short-term crises but no one is focusing on routine hunger” (ibid). Yet seasonal hunger is a process – a chronic, slow, persistent, insidious condition, rather than an event. There are two aspects to this: it evolves and is cyclic in nature and it is recurrent

³ Generally leading organisations like the FAO, WB, WFP, and IFPRI publish data on the global number of hungry and those that are chronically food insecure. It is often argued that those who suffer from year-round poverty are likely to be even poorer during a particular agricultural season, while those who are not poor year-round may be so during that season. Thus the actual numbers of seasonal hungry poor may be less or more than those who are undernourished year-round.

(Walker, 1989). Thus, unlike famine, the “nonemergency” seasonal hunger has remained quiet and has historically occupied a low place on the list of global political priorities, and as a result anti-hunger efforts do not receive the resources they need to be universally and effectively implemented (Vaitla, Devereux and Swan, 2009). In recent decades, though seasonal hunger has been combated to some extent by the strengthening of safety-net programmes, these are rarely implemented on a large scale or in an integrated manner, and Jalan and Ravallion (2000) in this regard have argued that the roots of this widespread, silent problem lie deeper and that the social and political relations of marginalisation is seldom revealed (Barraclough, 1991). When poverty is already rampant and perennial, pronounced seasonality of income and consumption only worsens seasonal poverty. In the short term, vulnerable households are not great competitors in the marketplace and are not capable of avoiding irreversible adverse effects on livelihood sustainability. Rather the “ratchet” effects may arise from their adopted coping strategies during the seasonal hunger. But integration of the specific contexts within which households make these decisions with the policy is mostly absent (Young, 2003). The physical incapacity of household members due to prolonged illnesses is also neglected in many programmes. The interlocking of poverty and seasonality thus needs to be studied beyond just one season or a year in the context of households’ livelihood strategies.

One important argument in favour of the continued analysis of seasonal hunger is that the problem itself is changing. Changes in structural adjustment over time, the freeing of labour markets, micro-credit and new forms of debt pressure on the rural poor, changes in the moral economy and social networks, changes in local governance structure, regional fragmentation of modes of decision making attendant on democratisation, rapid urbanisation and more emphasis on urban development, and the changing trend in climatic parameters, all of these processes cast the seasonal hunger problem in a new light. The battle against seasonal hunger must thus be fought on several fronts and we need to consider place and spaces within which people challenge prevailing material inequalities and the ideologies which perpetuate them in an effort to provide workable solutions to the world’s seasonal hunger and chronic food insecurity (Young, 2003). As Kates (2001: 9) wrote, “not all food shortages lead to hunger; not all hunger leads to starvation; not all starvation causes death”, under this scenario, one might say that studying seasonal hunger is like studying the last specimen of an endangered species of food insecurity (Webb and Braun, 1994). Policy makers and planners need to realise that the longer that decisions are made on an uninformed *ad hoc* basis, the longer the threat of seasonal hunger will persist. The longer that seasonal hunger persists, the greater the chronic hunger problem becomes or famine may be revisited where there is no famine because seasonal hunger is recognised as the “father of famine” (Devereux, Vaitla and Swan, 2008).

1.2.2 Perspectives on food insecurity and seasonal hunger in Northwest Bangladesh

The northwest Bangladesh, generally known as Greater Rangpur⁴, has one of the country's most persistent pockets of chronic poverty and is a food-insecure region. Historically, Rangpur is well known in the famine literature – it was one of the worst hit districts in the Great Bengal Famine of 1942–44 and, literally, it was the epicentre of the 1974 famine in Bangladesh (Alamgir 1980; Sen 1977). The region is characterized by a heavy dependence on agriculture that yields only one or sometimes two annual harvests, in contrast with the three elsewhere (Elahi and Ara, 2008). Agricultural wage rates are considerably lower there and there is a class of landless workers that constitute about one quarter (27%) of the rural population (Khair and Sikder, 2010). The topography and climate make this an ecologically vulnerable region due to destabilizing environmental phenomena. This region is highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods, riverbank erosion, droughts, cold periods and these occur more frequently and are more extreme than in other regions (CARE Bangladesh, 2005). This region shows little diversification along with slow progress in overall development and industrialisation, with poor infrastructure and few employment opportunities outside of agriculture (LCG, 2005). The households in Rangpur seem trapped by an economic geography in which livelihood opportunities are limited (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012) and the extreme poor do not have access to the benefits of economic growth (Toufique and Turton, 2002). It can be argued that the persistence food insecurity has intensified due to the lack of overall development – the seeds of which lie in the nation's unwise policy choices since in the early days of independence. Although average food consumption among the poor in the northern region is increasing, undernutrition indicators remain alarmingly high, defined by the World Food Programme (WFP, 2005) as those who cannot afford to eat more than 1,805 kcal per day (Bangladesh Planning Commission and WFP, 2005). The most vulnerable are women and girls, who are still most likely to be malnourished due to intra-household discrimination, and also those who live in the vulnerable *char* lands⁵ (Gill *et al.*, 2003). Even in seasons when aggregate food supplies are adequate and when, paradoxically, the greater Rangpur region is said to be a food surplus area, for instance a surplus of 276,840 MT in 2010 (Khair and Sikder,

⁴ The Greater Rangpur region was one of the old 17 administrative districts of Bangladesh. It became Bangladesh's 7th division on January 25, 2010 and consists of eight districts: Rangpur, Dinajpur, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Nilphamari, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon and Lalmonirhat. There are 58 upazillas under these eight districts. Rangpur is in the northwest most division of the country having 15.665 million people and a 1.2% annual growth rate (BBS, 2011). The division accounts for 11 percent of both the land area of Bangladesh and its population.

⁵ A '*char*' is low lying land, formed by the accretion of sediment in river deltas. Island *chars* are isolated or detached landmasses surrounded by water either the entire year or at least a significant portion of the year. Some *chars* become parts of the mainland because of the change of rivers course constantly and are then called attached or mainland *chars*. *Chars* are highly prone to floods and river erosion and change shape annually. Stable *chars* may remain relatively unchanged for decades. It is believed that between 5 and 6 million people in Bangladesh live in *char* lands (Unnayan Shamannay, 2008) and together the *chars* constitute one of the most backward regions of the country in terms of socio-economic status.

2010), a number of factors may prevent poor households or individuals from acquiring enough food. Therefore, production alone cannot ensure accessibility of food for the poor households.

Along with chronic food insecurity, one of the most concerning socio-economic issues is the Monga syndrome. Monga is a newly added 'discourse word' in the food security and poverty eradication agendas of Bangladesh (Anam and Ayub, 2006)⁶. The Monga is a routine cycle of food insecurity that strikes every year in two spells; the severe one is from September to November and the less severe one is from mid March to mid May. At these times there are no crops to be harvested and few alternative economic activities, particularly for the poor who face serious liquidity problems as economic activity dips and they become trapped in a period of poverty and hunger. Certain groups of people lose their purchasing power and the vulnerable poor simply do not have access to food in the markets (*The Daily Star*, 2004). However, deprivations due to the Monga are not only food insecurity or poverty; they also take place in non-economic spheres as well. The shocks that push the people over the edge into food insecurity are usually local natural disasters, aggravated by the specific vulnerability that the hard-core poor endure in economic, social, health, and governance factors.

It is well documented that the Monga came to the fore in the national media in the late 1990s, however, there is a still lack of Monga literature particularly concerning the realities at the household level. This seasonal hunger at the individual, household or community level does not generate an immediate policy response or at least, not to the same degree of response as 'famine' with its political underpinnings (Sen and Hulm, 2006). In recent years both the government and NGOs have started various programmes of intervention, having both short-term and long-term effects, including social safety nets, agricultural diversification and microcredit programmes adding to the regular ones by targeting poor households that are vulnerable to the Monga. But given the extent of widespread poverty and endemic food insecurity in Rangpur, it is argued by some that mitigating the Monga through short-term measures is unlikely to succeed. Thus, it is quite surprising that the government and NGOs have particularly failed to overcome the two-month long Monga of this region, while they are running multi-million-taka projects elsewhere in Bangladesh (Elahi and Ara, 2008). On the other hand, Zug (2006) noted that though the actors have built up a good knowledge about the problem, this knowledge has so far not been adequately shared and is mostly generalised, having few reflections on everyday household suffering and situations of food insecurity. Here, I would also argue that the interpretation of the Monga cannot be independent of an understanding of the socio-economic, political and their relational interactions that ultimately

⁶ Compared to famine events, the Monga has considered a relatively recent disaster (Elahi and Ara, 2008), not even ubiquitous in the late 1970s. Curry (1979) and Eusuf and Curry (1979) in their famine studies never mentioned for the Monga.

configure and reconfigure it. In the light of the foregoing, I therefore argue that a combination of unfavourable economic geography and agro-ecological exposures causing the poverty-seasonality nexus together create a challenging Monga problem that is an ideal test case for dealing with seasonal hunger (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012) both in academic and development arenas in Bangladesh.

1.3 Research aim and questions

Seasonal food security has mostly been examined in Bangladesh as a macro-level indicator of agricultural stability and progress by both agricultural and economic researchers. In addition, most works at the micro/household level have either used a poverty perspective or have adopted a dietary and nutritional point of view. Yet it is also the case that even some penetrating studies on Monga (for examples, see, Ali, 2006b; Elahi and Ara, 2008; Zug, 2006) were carried out, very few have combined in the same works the conceptual and perceptual dimensions along with the complex web of environmental, socio-economic and political interrelationships of seasonal food insecurity and hunger. It is exactly these silences and absences which render many studies of Monga so incapable of assessing the likelihood of food vulnerability with its true connotations. Thus, despite its significance in terms of localised crisis and socioeconomic consequences, the Monga is still little understood by many people. This is an immense weakness in Monga literatures in Bangladesh. Therefore, it is this significant research gap which the present study has sought to address by using qualitative methods to examine Monga vulnerability from the household perspective and so provide a way of deepening insights into the seasonal hunger and food insecurity situation in the Rangpur region. It will explore the underlying multiple factors that (re)shape food vulnerability at the household level, its nature and extent, and the hunger experiences of the poor according to their risk and resilience context. This research also investigates households' various coping and adaptive strategies to maximise food availability in the face of limited and variable access to resources during the Monga and how these are played out. But it is worthwhile to mention here that the present thesis does not attempt to develop a new theory of seasonal food security and hunger and the Monga. As noted by Carr (2006: 21), an "understanding of food outcomes is best constructed from an appreciation of local power/knowledge as inextricably bound up with these conditions by the unfolding of actions in a particular context", thus using people's own observation and perspectives of the Monga, so the present research has the more modest goal of providing a better understanding of the Monga syndrome empirically and more comprehensively to illustrate the subjective experiences of household vulnerability and resilience in the face of food insecurity, which is mostly missing in the existing Monga literature. In so doing, this research seeks to address the following questions:

1. *How does 'space vulnerability' (re)shape 'food vulnerability' at household level in Greater Rangpur?*
2. *What is the Monga and how has it evolved? How is the Monga associated with households' everyday issues?*
3. *What are the households' everyday food production and consumption behaviours and practices? What are the core characteristics of their food insecurity and hunger situation during the Monga?*
4. *What coping strategies do the households pursue during the Monga and how effective are these strategies in reducing seasonal hunger and, in turn, their long-term livelihood outcomes?*
5. *How have public policies and programmes been shaped and to what extent do they work to eradicate the Monga?*

How households in this region suffer and what interventions should be made to combat Monga and increase food security is therefore the principal focus of my thesis, based on a notion of the reality that can be both socially constructed and independent of the household experience. Here I would argue that without such core empirics on the Monga from the vulnerable groups, planning for more effective measures for its eradication is clearly limited. This research thus specifically addresses the Monga with the help of an interest in a geographical framework.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is divided into nine interrelated chapters. Chapter Two and Chapter Three present the background in conducting this empirical research on the Monga, building on the introduction. Chapter Two reviews a range of literature dealing with two core concepts, namely food in/security and vulnerability to food insecurity and hunger. It provides the main concepts, existing knowledge and key arguments in order that these concepts can be applied in the Monga context. The aim of this review is also to develop a theoretical understanding of these concepts so as to construe the findings in relation to existing theory. The approaches, particularly the question of the 'causation of seasonal hunger' and associated 'vulnerabilities to food security' at the household level is theorised in this regard. These theoretical approaches also explain why in some situations economic growth and modernisation have generated increased marginalisation and polarisation for many social groups in rural societies. Chapter Three then narrates the methodology with a focus on the philosophy and the significance of a qualitative approach to food security research. It reflects on the research design, research strategy, selection of the study area, and gives a detailed overview of the methodologies adopted. The chapter also highlights some research issues emerging from the field work, including the limitations associated with the methods used.

Chapters Four to Eight are the core research chapters. Chapter Four combines largely primary information and partial secondary material to explore why vulnerability to food insecurity occurs in the greater Rangpur. The answers in terms of the causation of food vulnerability will provide a sense of how food insecurity at the household level is shaped within the existing complex considerations of the physical, socio-economic and political domains of the northwest region. Chapter Five examines Monga perspectives, particularly an *emic* perspective of the Monga to show how the term ‘Monga’ is grounded in this region as seasonal hunger. This chapter also illustrates the causes, nature and changing extent of the Monga. The main contribution of this chapter is to define the Monga by linking the household perceptions and the theories put forward in Chapter Two. This chapter also examines how the Monga is associated with households’ everyday livelihood issues and concerns. Chapter Six examines the livelihood dimensions and dynamics of the households with special regard to their everyday food provisioning strategies and practices. This chapter has two sections. The first section characterises the household’s organisational aspects mainly, the gendered division of labour in relation to food production and consumption behaviours and their everyday food acquisition, intra-household food distribution and consumption situations. The second section of this chapter moves to deal with the core characteristics of household food insecurity during the Monga. Chapter Seven focuses on household decision making during the Monga and the factors that inform it. It particularly shows that households pursue both coping and adaptive activities to meet minimum food requirement in relation to their available options on the one hand, and on the other hand, how effective their coping strategies are in terms of their livelihood context vis-à-vis how they become trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and chronic food insecurity. Chapter Eight is based on policy and programme interventions to show how Monga eradication is viewed and shaped in existing policy and the effectiveness of the short and long term programmes and projects currently offered by both GOs and NGOs. This examination provides deep insights and an evaluation of alternative policy measures towards the eradication of the Monga.

Chapter Nine concludes the thesis. It pulls together the key findings and puts them into perspective in accordance with the research questions set out in Chapter One and emphasises the lessons learned. It also highlights the research contributions in three spheres: conceptual, methodological and policy contexts. The chapter argues that, though it is complex, the Monga can indeed be defeated given sufficient political will. Finally, this chapter provides possible directions for further research.

Chapter Two

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical approaches

2.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with existing development-oriented food security and hunger literature and theories in order to construct a vulnerability framework for researching seasonal food insecurity and hunger in northwest Bangladesh. It begins with a brief literature review of the conceptual context of food security, with particular reference to the Monga syndrome in Bangladesh. Then the chapter moves to the key conceptual and theoretical frameworks that underpin this thesis. The key theme of ‘vulnerability to food insecurity’, particularly at the household level, is discussed in terms of the conceptual approaches in the literature. The chapter ends with a synthesis of the approaches that opens up opportunities for examining the concepts that are central to an understanding of the ‘causation of the hunger’ in Northwest Bangladesh. The conceptual framework used in this thesis is not just about efforts to reduce food insecurity and hunger. It is also designed to call attention to hunger even when food is abundant. It links household-level food security dynamics to broader perspectives such as at the national level, arguing that they collectively provide a perspective of interlinked factors, specific to each of the different levels of social organisation (DeRose *et al.*, 1998), while seeing the household as a part of ecological, socio-economic and political processes. The food security of households is thus examined in terms of processes, dominant power composition and ideological (ir)rationalities (Omosa, 1998).⁷ Indeed, it seeks an enhanced integration of social and political economy approaches to vulnerability in relation to food security.

2.2 Food security and hunger: conceptual overview and key definitions

2.2.1 Changing paradigm of food security

Since its origin in 1970s, the concept of ‘food security’ has been primarily used to observe the complexity of widespread global hunger (Alcock, 2009). The FAO-organised World Food Conference in 1974 contributed to the acceptance of the term and channelled a growing literature on this issue as a way to deal with persistent ‘food insecurity’ (Devereux & Maxwell, 2001; Maxwell, 1990; 1991). Academics have been active in trying to define the term suitably, and a study conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) cites over 200 competing

⁷ As Long (1984) has argued, this kind of analysis makes it possible to see the different ways in which actors interpret and manage new elements in their lifeworld, how they create space for themselves, and how these interactional and interpretive processes influence and are themselves influenced by the broader structural context (Long, 1984).

definitions (Smith *et al.*, 1992). Simon Maxwell, who has produced work commonly referenced as foundational to food security studies, distinguishes three paradigm shifts in its meaning: “from the global/national to the household/individual; from a ‘food first’ perspective to a ‘livelihood’ perspective; and from objective indicators to subjective perceptions” (Migotto *et al.*, 2006; see also, Maxwell, 1996).

The 1974 World Food Conference primarily focused on food supplies as the major cause of food insecurity (Frankenberger and McCaston, 1998).⁸ Development and aid practitioners looked upon food outcomes as products of inadequate local food supplies, aid flows, or agricultural restructuring. But the limitations of this supply focus came to light during the food crisis that plagued Africa in the mid-1980s, and the paradigm then shifted to explore individual and household food security as opposed to food security from a national perspective (Argeñal, no date) emphasizing both availability and stable access to food. The credit for shifting this paradigm goes to Amartya Sen (1981) who instigated the issue of ‘access to food’ with the new terminology of ‘food entitlements’ as central to the explanation of famine causation. The FAO’s World Food Survey in 1987 also confirmed two important items of progress. The first was the irrelevance of Malthusian theories in that the serious progress in agriculture sector that had been achieved enabled humankind to feed a growing population (Simon, 2012); and second, it gave emphasis to Sen’s food entitlements.

The 1992 International Conference on Nutrition in Rome, jointly organized by FAO and WHO recognized that “access to nutritionally adequate and safe food is a right of each individual” (FAO, 1992). Since then much research has emphasised both food and nutritional security (Frankenberger, 1992) and it has been shown that food is only one factor in the malnutrition equation, and that, in addition to dietary intake and diversity, health and disease and maternal and child care are also important determinants (UNICEF, 1990). Many development practitioners and theorists highlighted 2,100 calories as a daily standard, the amount necessary for an individual to avoid hunger⁹. But this objective measure lacked the understanding that each individual needs a different quantity, quality, and type of food (Argeñal, no date)¹⁰. In

⁸ At this Conference food security was defined as: ‘... availability at all times of adequate world supplies of basic food-stuffs ... to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption ... and to offset fluctuations in production and prices’ (Devereux & Maxwell 2001:14).

⁹ The combined insufficiency of calories and protein, or protein-energy malnutrition (PEM) was considered to be the most widespread form of hunger. Protein-deficiency – including its severe clinical form, Kwashiorkor – was once considered the predominant form of undernutrition.

¹⁰ Nutritionists also agreed that most traditional vegetarian diets, consumed in qualities sufficient to meet energy needs, generally provide adequate protein as well, even where animal foods are absent. DeRose et al, (1998) argued that hunger does not necessarily imply appetite. Individuals may eat enough of certain bulky diets to feel satiated and yet obtain fewer calories and less of some or all nutrients than they need, while those who eat enough of a more nutrient-dense diet to satisfy their appetites may also be malnourished and vulnerable to diet-related

addition, nutrition scientists differentiate between ‘food security’ (availability of food at all levels), and ‘nutritional security’ (satisfactory nutritional status of individuals) in different perspectives (Oltersdorf and Weingartner, 1996), while other scientists and researchers have tended to consider ‘food security’ as a more comprehensive term integrating both concepts (Bohle, 2001) and consistently recognised that “globally there is enough food for all” but “inequitable access is the main problem” (Simon, 2012).

Just four years later, in 1996, the World Food Summit adopted a new formal definition that reinforces the multidimensional nature of food security; this included food availability, access, utilization and stability (FAO, 1996). Food security studies shifted their view to identify causal links between the social/material circumstances of the households and their experience of food insecurity (Maxwell, 1996b) suggesting that society, perception and knowledge had more important roles in food outcomes than was previously imagined (Carr, 2006). A good deal of research effort aimed at moving beyond environmental determinist explanations of food security (Ericksen, 2008). As a result, household food and nutritional security thus led the growing emphasis on food as a single input in household livelihood strategies (Carr, 2006; Ellis, 2000; Frankenberger and McCaston, 1998). The food security literature (for example, García, 2001; Maxwell, 1996a; Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992; Ruerd and Van den Berg, 2001; Shariar, 2002; Umezaki and Ohtsuka, 2003) then addressed the role of society in particular food outcomes through something of an inductive tracing of diffuse livelihood strategies and their connections in particular contexts (Carr, 2006). Likewise, the livelihood literature also incorporated the social into food and livelihood outcomes (see, Bryceson *et al.*, 2000; Carney, 1998; Chambers and Conway, 1992; Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 1998). This has enabled policy responses focused on the promotion and recovery of livelihood options and included the concepts of vulnerability, risk coping and risk management (FAO, 2006). Linking famine to broader structural issues, food security became an ever more complex concept seeking locally specific causes of insecurity. A great deal of empirical evidence about the importance of society in food outcomes has driven the emphasis on society, local knowledge and perception in these contemporary literatures. Though Sen himself (1981) used the term “vulnerability” in reference to exogenous hazards or economic shocks, authors who sought to operationalise Sen’s ideas for assessment and famine-prevention purposes began to invoke the word “vulnerability” to refer to the complex web of socio-economic determinants (for examples, see, Borton and Shoham, 1991; Swift, 1989; Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992; Middleton and O’Keefe, 1998; Ribot, 1995). In short, as the link between food security,

chronic disease, i.e. excessive fat is growing as a dietary problem in urban communities in developing countries. There is mounting evidence that, even if weaning foods are eaten in sufficient quantity to meet energy requirements, there may be important protein and micronutrient deficiency (Allen *et al.*, 1991; Brown, 1991; Golden and Golden, 1991).

starvation and crop failure becomes a thing of the past, the analysis of food insecurity as a social and political construct has emerged (Devereux, 2001).

2.2.2 Key definitions and dimension of food in/security and hunger

The Rome Declaration of 1996, laid the foundations for diverse paths to a common objective of food security at all levels: “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 1996). This widely accepted definition points to the following dimensions of food security.

Food availability: The availability of sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality, supplied through domestic production or imports (including food aid).

Food access: Access by individuals to adequate resources for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet.

Utilization: This brings out the importance of non-food inputs in food security such as clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met.

Stability: The concept of stability refers both to the availability and access to adequate food at all times.

In the above definitional context, the FAO (1996) then stated that to achieve food security at national level, all four of its components must be adequate and that the opposite of food security is regarded as food insecurity. However, national food security depends on the household-level food security as a fundamental unit. Chen and Kates (1994:193) stated that “at a household level, food security tends to be equated with the sufficiency of household entitlements - that bundle of food-production resources, income available for food purchases, and gifts or assistance sufficient to meet the aggregate food requirements of all household members”. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) concisely defines household food security as “the capacity of a household to procure a stable and sustainable basket of adequate food” (IFAD, 1992). Here, adequacy refers both to the quality and quantity of food that meets the nutritional requirements of all members of the household and stability denotes the household’s ability to procure food across seasons and transitory shortages. Household food security integrates four subsystems: “production, exchange, delivery and consumption” (Cannon, 1991:298). In this context, food insecurity is unavailability of food due to insufficient purchasing power, inappropriate distribution, or inadequate utilization at the household level (Atkins, 2009:14).

At the household level, food insecurity may be chronic or transitory. The difference between the two is emphasized by a World Bank (WB) definition (1986:1): “Chronic food insecurity is

a continuously inadequate diet caused by the inability to acquire food. It affects households that persistently lack the ability either to buy enough food or produce their own. Transitory food insecurity is a temporary decline in a household's access to enough food. It results from the instability in food prices, food production or household incomes due to seasonality, prolonged disaster time such as during the time of flood – and in its worst form it produces famine". Though for most people hunger is synonymous with famine (Cannon, 1991:194), however famine is a different problem (FAO, 1996). Hunger is undernourishment. It is endemic; a deeply-entrenched, and widespread problem primarily a lack of sufficient dietary requirement (ibid). The hungry of the world have enough food to survive, but not enough food for good health, on a continuing basis. There doesn't have to be a famine for people to go hungry. On the other hand, famine is a food crisis resulting in major excess mortality and widespread severe, acute malnutrition (Atkins, 2009:14). Defined by the United Nation (UN) "a famine can be declared only when at least 20 percent of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope; acute malnutrition rates exceed 30 percent; and the death rate exceeds two persons per day per 10,000 persons" (UN News Centre, 2011). However, transitory food insecurity may become chronic, and irregular occurrences sometimes change into cyclical patterns, i.e. seasonal food insecurity and hunger. But unlike famine, this hunger is a quiet and predictable starvation.

2.3 Vulnerability to food security and hunger

Vulnerability is now a widely accepted concept in social science, in very different ways both theoretically and empirically (Geest and Dietz, 2004). From the beginning, the introduction of the vulnerability concept was closely linked to issues of poverty, famines and food security (Eriksen, Bohle and Stewart, 2010: 68). In food-related contexts, the question, "vulnerable to what?" is nearly universally answered by 'food insecurity', 'famine', 'hunger' and 'the undesirable outcomes that vulnerable populations face (Dilley and Boudreau, 2001). Although the foundation of the concept is closely associated with poverty, it is not the same as poverty; rather, rising poverty is a factor that contributes to increased vulnerability (Bohle, 2001; Young *et al.*, 2001). The poor are the most vulnerable by explanation, but understanding vulnerability stands on a disaggregation of the structure of poverty itself (Swift, 1989: 8). Hilhorst and Bankoff (2004:1) noted that "at one level the answer is a straight forward one about poverty, resource depletion and marginalisation; at another level, it is about the diversity of risks generated by the interplay between local and global processes and coping with them on a daily basis". Earlier, Ribot *et al.* (1996: 16) noted that "vulnerability occurs at a junction of

physical, social and political- economic processes and events.” Combining several ‘bodies of thought’, Kates and Millman (1990:10) outlined a general ‘causal structure of hunger’ that ‘hunger arises in the interstices of ... greater productivity, growing population, economic specialization, and surplus appropriation ... against a background of natural variation in ... resources and hazards affecting food production’. Alamgir and Arora (1991:10) identified the ‘long term structural factors’ of hunger as: production, entitlement, trade and exchange, and food aid and food security. Thus, the term ‘vulnerability’ in food security accumulated a wide variety of connotations (Longhurst, 1986) and views of the full range of complex ecological, socio-cultural and political-economic perspectives (Yaro, 2004) that place people at risk of becoming food-insecure (Simon, 2012). Alwang *et al.* (2001:1) noted that vulnerability is a “forward looking” concept and a constructive way of capturing it is to view vulnerability both as a cause and as an outcome.

An elaborated discussion of vulnerability to food security is provided by Chambers (1989) in terms of both internal incapacity and external contingencies, each being debilitating to peasant livelihoods. In the same line, the WFP (2009:172) retains the following definition: “the vulnerability to food insecurity is made of all the factors that constitute a risk for people to become food insecure including factors that affect their capacity to face the difficulty they meet”. Chambers drew attention to what Bohle (2001) later called the ‘double structure of vulnerability’: an external side of risks, shocks, and stress to which an individual or household is subject: and an internal side which is defencelessness (Bohle, 2001; Chambers, 1989:1), meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss and the limited potential for recovery (Watts and Bohle, 1993: 45). Vulnerability is relative to a certain hazard (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994: 59) and a certain consequence (Ribot *et al.*, 1996:16). Davies (1996) clarifies Chambers’ integrated approach by differentiating between proximate and structural vulnerability: the first one represents the trends and shocks that poor people face, and the latter is the result of past proximate vulnerability or conditions. Von Braun (1991) showed three structural causes in chronic food insecurity of Africa: ‘policy failures’ (economic strategy, war), ‘resource poverty/bad luck/disaster’ (infrastructure, asset distribution, environmental hazards) and ‘population transition’ (demographic growth). However, structural causes tend to focus on immediate or proximate causes of food insecurity and hunger, including long-term structural patterns – in other words, the larger crisis of social reproduction – and to gloss over intra-household and inter-community entitlements (Watts, 1987). The external shock or stress might potentially be both natural and social and political catastrophic events or ‘shocks’ e.g. floods,

droughts, market failure, forced migration, etc., while others characterise pervasive uncertainty in the livelihood stemming from various short term to long run causes, e.g. seasonality. On the other hand, the internal aspect is more directly related to poverty, representing the people's capacity (resilience) to cope with external shocks (Young *et al.*, 2001). Inability to cope and recover is mainly caused by a lack of resources, alternatives and buffer capacity, associated with poverty (Geest and Dietz, 2004). Vulnerability thus, can be expanded to capture a more complex relationship between *risks*, ability to cope (Simon, 2012) and recovery potential (Bohle *et al.*, 1994: 39) that affect food security. From this vantage point, the most vulnerable individuals, groups, classes and regions are those most exposed to perturbations, who possess the most limited coping capability, who suffer the most from crisis impact, and who are endowed with the most circumscribed capacity for recovery (Watts and Bohle, 1993). Thus, the two dimensions of vulnerability – 'sensitivity' (the magnitude of the system's response to an external event) and its 'resilience' (the ease and rapidity of the system's recovery from stress) – are crucial (Davis, 1996).¹¹ Vulnerable livelihood systems are highly sensitive and not very resilient, where negative shocks easily cause food insecurity. The impact of the external shock on livelihoods depends on the combination of the intensity of the external shock, and the household's ability to cope (Young *et al.*, 2001). Some households will not fully recover and their livelihoods become more vulnerable. The lower the resilience and the higher the sensitivity, the higher the vulnerability and vice versa (Gebrehiwot, 2001). Resilience and sensitivity, however, permit livelihoods to be described as a gradation from being highly robust to highly vulnerable, with respect to food security outcomes (Ellis, 2003).

The World Bank also adopted a risk-based approach emphasising the minimisation of risk exposure (Scaramozzino, 2006). The Bank's "Social Risk Management" (2005) framework for assessing household vulnerability considers the sources of vulnerability and the community's ability to manage the associated risk (see, De Weerd, 2005). In terms of sources of vulnerability, Adger (1999) conceptually separated internal (household-related) and external (area-related or community-related) variables (see also, de Bruijn *et al.*, 2005). This distinction between individual and collective vulnerability has also its parallel in terms of risk: idiosyncratic risks impact at the micro level, i.e. specific individuals or households, and covariate risks affect at the meso level, i.e. a whole village or region (Baas *et al.*, 2001; Nijzink 1999). It is, however, well documented that a unit such as the 'household' must be

¹¹ The ideas that have been used to deepen the concept of vulnerability are those of resilience and sensitivity, which originate in the ecological (Holling, 1973) and natural resource management literatures (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Bayliss-Smith, 1991).

disaggregated and handled with extreme care as a unit of analysis in vulnerability (Watts, 1988) – an important point since this is the principal analytical unit of this thesis. However, though theoretically, poverty, household vulnerability and undernourishment are distinct conditions, in practice these conditions intersect and overlap each other: “poor households are usually most vulnerable to transitory and chronic food insecurity, hence they are often undernourished” (Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992). Within food-insecure households, individuals do not suffer from hunger equally but there are differences in distribution and negotiating abilities of individuals (Argeñal, no date). Oshaug (1985) therefore identifies three kinds of households: ‘enduring households’, which maintain household food security on a continuous basis; ‘resilient households’, which suffer shocks but recover quickly; and ‘fragile households’, which become increasingly insecure in response to shocks.” Similar approaches are found elsewhere (Benson *et al.*, 1986). The persistence of resilient households during the period of food insecurity lies in their ability to adapt and exploit a range of strategies to secure access to food. On the other hand, fragile households are unable to restore food security after some exogenous shock and, consequently, their trajectory is increasingly towards a chronic position. Therefore, in the context of household food security, resilience refers to the durability and adaptability of those systems and strategies central in securing access to food over time (Alderson, 2001: 67).

2.4 The Monga vulnerability: Review of literature

Although a few other districts of Bangladesh suffer from ‘Monga-type’ seasonal poverty and hunger to varying degrees, it is most marked in Rangpur where interlocking seasonality and endemic poverty, induced by its dominant rice economy, results in an extreme form of seasonal hunger. The media, researchers and political parties have gradually come to see the ‘Monga’ only as a problem of the northwest region, though there were debates until 2005 when it was institutionalised into the country’s Poverty Reduction Papers (PRPs). The Monga has been forwarded “as a problem rather than a cause” (DER, 2004) and various individuals and organisations have viewed it mainly in terms of two central outcomes: i) a famine-like situation; and, ii) a seasonal food insecurity and hunger. Some researchers also stated the Monga as seasonal poverty. Some of the early definitions of the Monga are given in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: The Monga in development literature in Bangladesh.

Broad perspectives	Sources	Adopted definitions
Famine-like situation	Muhammad (2006)	Monga is a Bengali word that means a famine-like situation, which appears especially in September or in the Bangla months of <i>Ashwin</i> and <i>Kartik</i> . People usually call the period <i>mora kartik</i> , meaning the months of death and disaster.
	PKSF (Palli Karma Sahayak Foudation) (2007)	The Monga is a seasonal famine-like situation or seasonal shortfall (of food) that occurs every year in various degrees of intensity during the Bangla months of <i>Ashwin</i> and <i>Kartik</i> especially in Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari and Rangpur districts.
	RDRS (Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service) (2006; 2011)	The Monga is a famine-like situation in which the poor suffer acute deprivation caused by their lack of purchasing power arising from a seasonal scarcity of gainful employment.
	Ahamad <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Generally, the term Monga is used to describe a near famine like situation, and is also an indicator of seasonal food shortage which prevails in some northern districts of Bangladesh.
Seasonal food insecurity and hunger	Shamsuddin <i>et al.</i> (2006)	The Monga is a seasonal starvation condition faced mainly by the poor and the landless agricultural labourers in Northern Bangladesh due to a lack of employment in the months of September and October (elsewhere stated by them as September – November), resulting in a drop in their purchasing capacity.
	Zug (2006)	The Monga is seasonal food insecurity in ecologically vulnerable and economically weak parts of northwest Bangladesh, primarily caused by an employment and income deficit before the <i>Aman</i> is harvested. It mainly affects those rural poor who have an undiversified income that is directly or indirectly based on agriculture.
	Rahman <i>et al.</i> (2007)	The Monga is a hunger and famine-like situation [that] prevails in the north western regions particularly during the lean season as the poorest do not have access to livelihoods and work.
	Elahi and Ara (2008)	The Monga is an economic crisis manifested through seasonal unemployment and the absence of any alternative source of income typically faced by certain groups of population in Northern Bangladesh resulting in sudden loss of their purchasing power leading to lack of access to food and other daily necessities.

From these we can see a generalised definition as a particular form of localised seasonal incidence of joblessness that results in the prolonged impoverishment and destitution of certain population groups in the rural areas of the northwest region. Raja (2008) argued that “this is not Monga in the real sense of the term. Anyhow, this is now being termed a Monga” (*PROBE News Magazin*, November 18 – 24, 2008). Khair and Sikder (2010) stated that, although these definitions are much nearer to the meaning of the Monga, they somewhat detract from the true connotation of the term in a characteristic situation. Reviewing the famine literature (Alim, 1981; Chen, 1973; Curry, 1979; Greenough, 1982; Sen, 1981; Shah, 1999), Elahi and Ara (2008) argued that the famine history in Bangladesh indicated that sporadic food scarcity for

various reasons was more or less common for a long time (Curry, 1979), but for the northwest part of Bangladesh the Monga is closely associated with various issues and it is one of the major indicators of how acute poverty exists in this region. As a spatial distribution, Monga condition mainly prevail five districts of Rangur region named Nilphamari, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram and Gaibandha along with in peripheral areas prone to riverbank erosion and regular droughts. Using poverty index data in Bangladesh, Zug (2006) produced a comprehensive map of the spatial distribution of the Monga affected areas (Figure 2.1).

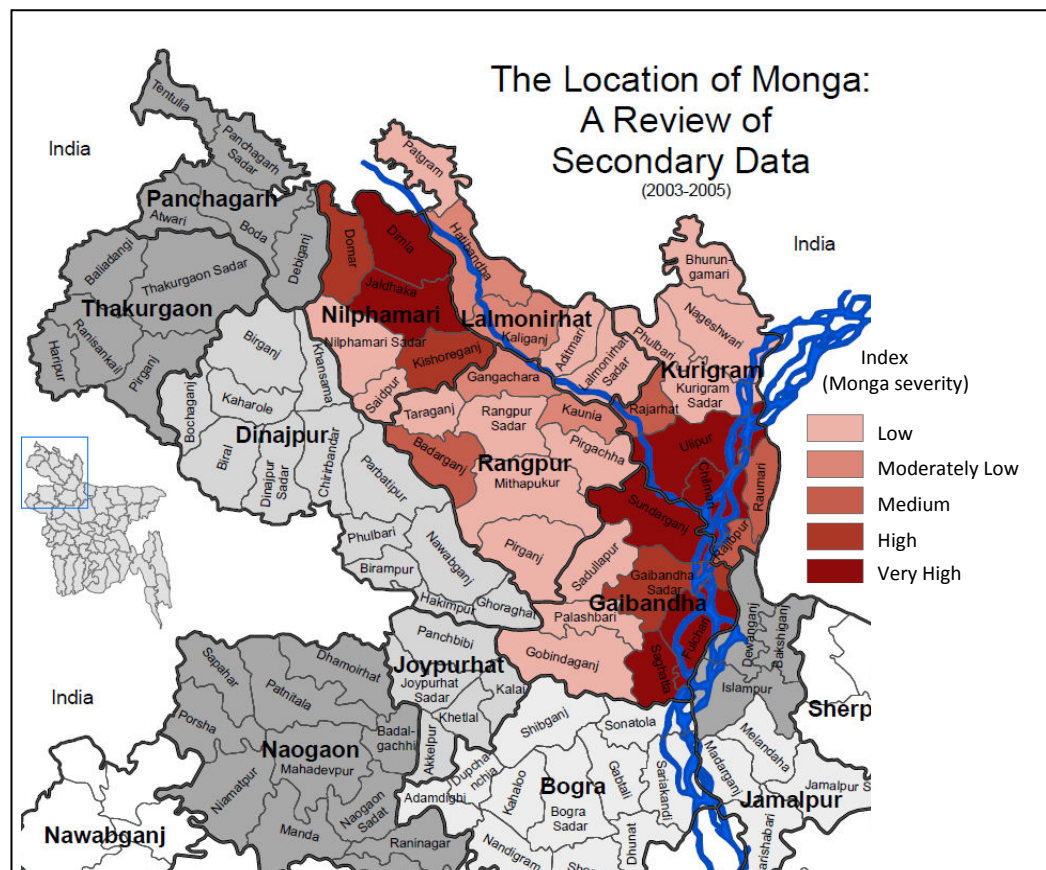


Figure 2.1: The location of the Monga prone areas according to their severity.
Source: Reproduced from Zug, 2006.

However, there is no official data about how many people are Monga-affected. Taking an unofficial source, Shanto (2006) estimated that the total number of Monga-affected people in the northwest region is about 4.1 million¹². The literature suggests that the most affected Monga people are agriculture labourers, marginal and small farmers with very little

¹² An estimate made by Palli Karma-Shahayak Foundation (PKSF) as quoted by Mazid (2007) indicates that 25 out of 35 upazilas of these five districts are severely affected by *Monga*. Of them (25 upazila), more than 1.10 million households spread over 212 unions are reported to be poor. Among them, almost 50% households are perennially affected by *Monga* every year. Out of these households, 50% are ultra poor, 25% moderately poor and the rest 25% are poor. Another estimate made by BBS (2005) stipulated that there are about 596,645 *Monga*-affected agricultural labourer households out of 2,038,130 households covering 35 upazilas of five districts of greater Rangpur region, totalling of 2,684,903 affected people at 4.5 persons per household.

agricultural land, landless people in the *char* areas who are mostly displaced by river bank erosion, and female-headed households (Khair and Sikder, 2010). As a temporal point of view (as mentioned in section 1.2), the traditional focus on *Ashwin-Kartik* (Mid September to Mid November) seasonal poverty is indeed a core aspect of the problem. This happens after the *Aman* rice crop is sown in September and before its harvest in mid November, causing a lack of farm activities and lowering the purchasing power for food and other necessities of the affected group of people (RDRS, 2006). There is virtually no demand for wage labour – precisely when thousands of labourers are desperate to earn a few takas (Bangladeshi currency) to buy much needed food. Many of them and their families have already entered a routine of only one poor meal per day, which leads to a state of chronic malnutrition and starvation (Hossain *et al.*, 2010). Seasonal hunger thus can be seen to result from the seasonality in agricultural income combined also with households' limited capacity to smooth consumption year round, i.e. by saving money or storing food (Khandker and Mahmud, 2011).

Using the food security concept adopted from FAO, 1996 (see section 2.2.1), Zug (2006) showed that food availability is not a problem for the northwest region; rather, the Monga differs every year in its severity mainly because accessibility and utilization vary in their stability. During the Monga people reduce the quantity of nutritional intake, and to compensate they consume cheap and unhygienic food. Hence, the rural poor may have to survive an extended period without proper meals and sometimes with no food at all (RDRS, 2011). A survey in Rangpur in 2007 showed that occasional starvation went up from less than 10% in the non-monga season to a staggering 50% in the Monga season (IMF, 2008). Already chronically undernourished people become weaker during the Monga and morbidity increases and makes it even worse for them to overcome the short but serious Monga period (Elahi and Ara, 2008). Talukder (2000) stated that in the Monga region, instability is another important feature of the food security situation in the country. Because during these periods, grain stocks of the subsistence and deficit farmers are generally exhausted, food prices are at their highest but agricultural wages are generally at their lowest. All of these factors contribute to reducing food security during these periods. Along with the impact of natural disasters as triggering agents, most researchers have stressed the seasonal food price inflation that makes the Monga more severe. Khandker and Mahmud (2011) here argue that “it is not a necessary correlate as in the case of famine. That is why Monga may remain unnoticed as a form of silent hunger, since it is the abnormal food price hike that usually creates public outcry. This also explains why the government's interventions for food price stabilization as a means of food security have not worked to mitigate Monga” (ibid: 2). However, the persistence of the Monga suggests that national level food security doesn't reflect the food security in the Rangpur region. In fact,

most researchers have argued that Monga vulnerabilities are deeper and larger than a problem of seasonal food insecurity per se (Rahman, 2007). CEGIS (2005) emphasised that the Monga's effects override the overall state of people's capabilities, assets and activities that are required for the sustainability of their means of living. The national newspapers focusing on the Monga incident in a broad scene have offered a great deal of insight into the problem as their reports were dispatched by local journalists at the upazila and union level (Ali, 2006). The existing literature leads to observations that tend to relate the Monga situation with many critical faces of vulnerability:

- Historical perspectives of famine or famine-like situation;
- Food security and related issues (morbidity, chronic undernutrition, etc.);
- Pocket of ecological vulnerability – physiographic, soil, climatic conditions,¹³ dimension of vulnerability due to natural disasters at local level;
- Overall underdevelopment, widespread poverty, inequality issues like landlessness, land ownership, land reform, low diversity of livelihoods, etc.;
- Seasonality of employment, unemployment in non-farm sectors and others;
- Non-diversified agriculture development and low wage compared to other regions and Price hikes, expenditure;
- Weak policy and programmes to tackle the Monga;
- Intensive erosive coping strategies, migration and displacement of population.

However, it should be mentioned here that the relevant data and literature related to the Monga syndrome are not available in a systematic manner or in a sequential time-frame. Moreover, whether it is a seasonal famine-like situation or seasonal food insecurity and hunger, the food vulnerability of the affected households has not been adequately examined from their point of view. However, it is hoped that the above discussion may lead to the formation of a theoretical construct to understand vulnerability to this seasonal hunger in northwest Bangladesh.

2.5 My Approach: theorisation of vulnerability to food security and hunger

My focus in this section is to theorise the vulnerability to food security and hunger in relation to the Monga in Bangladesh. Here I would argue that the Monga is highly variegated with inevitable consequences, that it contains intricate causal relationships and generates complex effects, and that we need to establish its specific character, extent and effects for particular classes, strata and gender groups in particular places, localities and regions (Watts, 1988). My approach is based on a conceptual framework drawn from Watts and Bohle (1993). Extending

¹³ A severe seasonal vulnerability determined by contextual factors; the two most important being timing of excess rain in August and September and robustness of the preceding *Boro* crop (Rahman, 2007).

the understanding of the crucial links of entitlements to wider political processes, they showed a ‘causal structure of hunger and famine’ and defined it as ‘space of vulnerability’ through an intersection of three causal powers: command over food (entitlement), state/civil society relations seen in political and institutional terms (enfranchisement/empowerment), and the structural-historical form of class relations within a specific political economy (surplus appropriation/crisis proneness). These three causal powers emanated from the three complementary theoretical positions that together form an ‘analytical triangle’: the entitlement approach, the empowerment approach and the political economy approach (Figure 2.2).

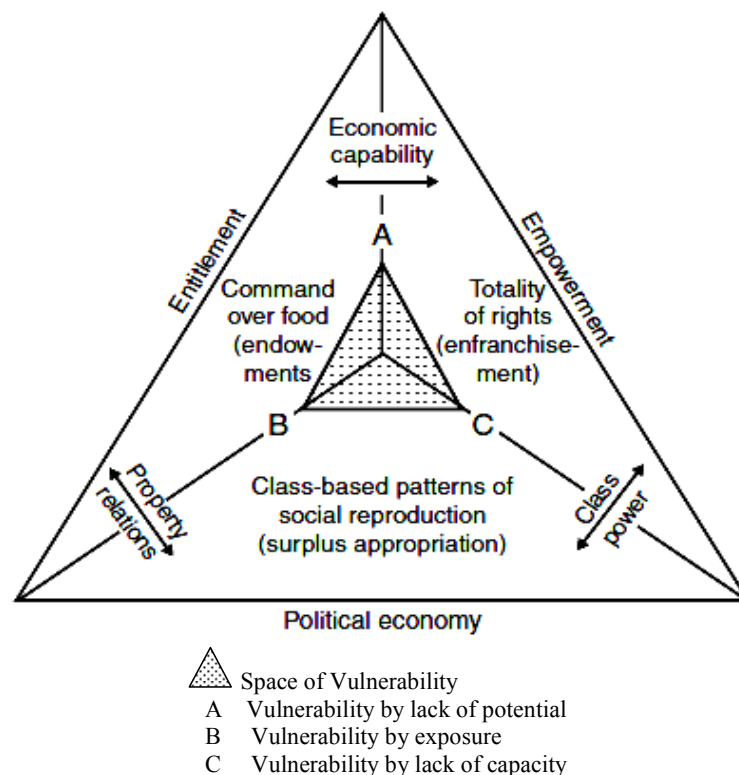


Figure 2.2: The causal structure of vulnerability to hunger.
Source: Adapted from Watts and Bohle, 1993.

According to the Watts and Bohle (1993:54), “economic capability emerges from particular configurations of entitlement and empowerment, property relations from the intersection of entitlement and political economy, and class power from specific forms of political economy and empowerment”. In the entitlement lexicon, vulnerability refers the associated risks or threats of large-scale entitlement deprivation, very often caused as a function of market perturbations, with a particular emphasis on land, labour and commodity markets (ibid). Empowerment approaches contain two aspects – politics and power. Empowerment encapsulates the notion of ‘right to food’ (Drèze *et al.*, 1995) as a part of the fundamental

rights of the human personality. Vulnerability, in this account refers to “a political space and to a lack of rights” (ibid). This means both ‘property rights’ that ensure access to land and other assets and ‘political rights’, which refers to the process by which claims can be made over public resources that are important for household food security and avoiding entitlements failure. As a political space, food insecurity and hunger results from limited rights and power and vulnerability includes those groups that are denied crucial rights¹⁴ in/between three political domains: the domestic (intra-household politics), work (production politics) and the public sphere (state politics) (Geest and Dietz, 2004). Therefore, in a food security context, powerlessness may exist at a multiplicity of levels, i.e. intra-household inequities over access and control to resources and property rights, stratification at village level, political inclusion and exclusion processes concerning the right to use of land, and access to local credit and national level power (Harriss, 1989). On the other hand, a historically specific class map of surplus appropriation and accumulation and the corresponding configurations of crisis, conflicts and contradictions is the central focus of the class-based political economy (Patnaik, 1991). In general, these crisis tendencies arise under capitalism as a result of structural contradictions and conflicts between classes, between the relations and forces of production, and between accumulation and production conditions (Harvey 1982; O’Connor 1988). According to Watts and Bohle (1993), vulnerability is here understood as “an expression of capacity, specifically class capacity defined by the social relations of production in which individuals and households participate. In a class perspective, seasonal hunger is not only a simple poverty problem, it requires an in-depth understanding of the relations by which surpluses are mobilized and appropriated. Vulnerability to food security is thus a structural-historical phenomenon of commercialisation, proletarianisation and marginalisation (Watts and Bohle, 1993). However, many scholars thought that class analyses of hunger and famine are similar, in many respects to ‘political ecology’ (Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). Later, Bohle *et al.* (1994) present an adjusted causal structure of vulnerability¹⁵ based on human ecology, expanded entitlements (following Drèze and Sen’s (1989) incorporation of ‘totality of rights’ in the entitlement approach, the ‘empowerment’ and the ‘entitlement’

¹⁴ Earlier, Mead Cain (1983) identified two types of risk in rural Bangladesh; one is the gender discrimination in access to and control over resources (within a specific notion of political ecology) and the differences in wage rates; and the other is the complexity faced by the rural peasants to protect their property rights against the predatory local landlords and corrupt governmental bodies of state (Chen, 1991).

¹⁵ Geest and Dietz (2004) argued that natural factors are absent as outlined in “the causal structure of vulnerability”. This notion, particularly introduces ‘social or political-economic determinism’ (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994: 12) that overlooks the natural environment when studying vulnerability to food insecurity in rural people’s livelihoods. We saw in the section 2.4 that natural factors like fragile agro-ecological condition and natural disasters like floods, riverbank erosion, drought in the Monga-prone areas not only act as trigger events, but in agriculturally dependent settings they also largely determine affected poor’s entitlements to food even in ‘normal’ years, and increase their vulnerability to food insecurity. Ribot (1996) argues that environmental (including climatic) variability and change should be incorporated in the social framework of vulnerability. However, reintegrating natural or environmental variables in the causal structure of vulnerability requires a careful distinction between natural factors as *causes* of vulnerability and natural factors that act as *trigger events* (Geest and Dietz, 2004).

approaches are grouped together under ‘expanded entitlements’) and political economy. Bohle *et al.* (1994) argue that considering both the risk environment that the vulnerable poor confront and the quality of their resource endowments under the social and political system are crucial to understanding their vulnerability. In line with that, Yaro (2004) indicates that “dynamic on-going political economic processes of extraction, accumulation, social differentiation, marginalisation, and physical processes all affect vulnerability”. Therefore, based on the concept of vulnerability of Watts and Bohle (1993) and a further modification by Bohle *et al.* (1994), below I thus discuss three approaches/theories – Sen’s entitlements, political economy and political ecology – in addressing vulnerability to food insecurity and hunger.

Sen’s Entitlement Theory

In his work *Poverty and Famines*, Amartya Sen (1981) provides a systematic framework for the definition and assessment of vulnerability and famine by shifting the analytical focus away from a fixation on food supplies and on to the inability of groups of people to acquire food (Devereux, 2001). According to Sen, food insecurity has to be seen as the characteristics of the person not having enough to eat. This is not tantamount to saying that “there isn’t enough to eat” (Mukherjee, 2004:2). Citing examples from the Ethiopian, Bangladeshi and Sahelian famines, Sen established that the Food Availability Decline (FAD) model had serious flaws and can be misleading (Shanguhya, 2008). He realized that food availability alone does not ensure access by all to it; how much food households actually have access to depends upon their own production, exchange, income, gathering of foods, community support (claims), assets, and migration (Frankenberger, 1992). In a nutshell, Sen (1981:154-155) summarises his entitlement theory as follows: “A person’s ability to command food ... depends on the entitlement relations that govern possession and use in that society. It depends on what he owns, what exchange possibilities are offered to him, what is given to him free, and what is taken away from him.” Sen (1984:497) defined entitlements as “the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that s/he faces”. The ‘entitlement set’ constitutes all ranges of goods and services that a person can acquire by converting his/her ‘endowments’ through ‘exchange entitlement mappings’ (Devereux, 2001). In this context, Sen (1981) reduces all legal sources of food to four categories of entitlements: i) Production-based entitlement (growing/producing food), ii) Trade-based entitlement (buying/purchasing food), iii) Own-labour entitlement (working for food); and, iv) Inheritance and transfer entitlement (being given food by others). The food security problem is, therefore, seen as a problem both of supply and of lack of effective demand amongst the poor (Yaro, 2004) and a range of socioeconomic factors that determine access to food (Okyere *et al.*, 1997). As a descriptive concept this derives from legal rights

rather than morality or human rights¹⁶ (Devereux, 2001:246). However, entitlements are attributes not only of broad social classes but are also expressed in gender, age, and social relations which point to important food insecurities at the intrahousehold level (Vaughn, 1987; Harriss, 1989).

Entitlement analysis requires three kinds of basic conceptual aspects, namely the ‘entitlement set’, the ‘endowment set’ and the ‘entitlement mapping’ (Osmani, 1995). The endowment set is a combination of all legal resources (both tangible and non tangible) owned by a person and established by social norms and practices and by official legislation. The ‘Entitlement mapping’ is the relationship between the endowment set and the entitlement set where resources or the endowment set can be converted into goods and services (Osmani, 1995). Hence ‘exchange entitlement’ refers to the set of all the alternative bundles of commodities that individuals can acquire in exchange for what they own. Sen (1981:8) explains food insecurity thus: “a person will starve if his entitlement set does not include a commodity bundle with enough food. A person is reduced to starvation if some change occurs either in his endowment (e.g. alienation of land, loss of labour power due to ill health), or in his exchange entitlement mapping (e.g. fall in wages, rise in food prices, loss of employment, drop in price of goods he buys and sells), makes it no longer possible for him to acquire any commodity bundle with enough food.” The concept of entitlement failure is derived from the two distinct ways in which a collapse might occur: i) endowments contact; and/or ii) exchange entitlements shift unfavourably – so that households experience a decline in their ‘terms of trade’ with the market for food (Devereux, 1993). Thus, the essence of the approach is that people starve because i) they have insufficient real income and wealth and ii) because there are no other means of acquiring food. Inadequate food purchasing power is only a necessary, not a sufficient, precondition for starvation (ibid).

Some scholars observe that the Sen’s entitlement concept bypasses those entitlements stemming from an individual’s traditional rights to communal resources (Mukherjee, 2004) and from the external social system under the rubric of moral economy. Svedberg (1985) points out that “the other means of acquiring entitlements to food essentially comprise transfers (redistribution) of food on the international, national, regional and family level” (Svedberg, 1985; 8-9). In times of food stress, coping strategies form an additional set of entitlements that are derived from the endowments. This formulation comes from Davies

¹⁶ Sen (1981: 45) summarizes the premises of the entitlement approach as, “the entitlement approach to starvation and famines concentrates on the ability of people to command food through the legal means available in the society, including the use of production possibilities, trade opportunities, entitlements vis-à-vis the state, and the other methods of acquiring food. A person starves either because s/he does not have the ability to command enough food or because s/he does not use this ability to avoid starvation”.

(1996: 35-36) – who can be considered a representative of the *extended* entitlement approach (Geest and Dietz, 2004:123). Thus, from an expanded entitlement perspective, Watts and Bohle, (1993) see vulnerability to food security is thus a socioeconomic space which is delineated by three domains: market perturbations (economic exchange), coping thresholds (socioeconomics of resilience) and social security limitations (informal ‘moral economies’ or formal welfare institutions).

In most recent elaborations of entitlement theory, food insecurity is not seen simply as caloric deprivation but also in terms of the real freedoms that people have for leading a valuable life, that is, what Drèze and Sen call ‘capabilities’, for example, Sen (1999: 87) states “poverty must be seen as the deprivation of the basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty.” The broad notion of ‘capability’ refers to people’s potential ‘functionings’ (what people are able to be and to do) and approaches the totality of rights by which individuals, groups and classes command endowments and commodity bundles (Sen, 1987). However, the focus on capabilities does not deny the important contribution that resources can make to people’s well-being. Indeed, inequalities in resources can be significant causes of inequalities in capabilities and therefore also need to be studied (Robeyns, 2003: 64). In the capability context, an entitlement approach thus provides a secondary perspective of vulnerability and hunger, namely empowerment that addresses the ability to debate, negotiate, add one’s voice to the political process and be an agent of ‘social change’ (Ray-Bennett *et al.*, 2010: 583) by which the legitimacy of claims made by groups and classes over public resources, also raises the question of rights over food, and hence links entitlement with enfranchisement (Watts and Bohle, 1993: 49).

The entitlement theory has been widely criticized on several fronts, ranging from a “favourable ‘assessment’” by Osmani (1995), to less favourable “reassessment” by de Waal (1990), a “critique” by Nolan (1993), a “refutation” by Bowbrick (1986), and even a dismissal as a theoretical “failure” by Rangasami (1985) and Fine (1997) (Devereux, 2001: 245). The silence on the dynamics of exercising power in the distribution of the means of access to food is notable (Davies 1996; Yaro, 2004). The complexity and contingency at the household/individual level remains beyond the Sen’s “meta-theory and its sterile, descriptive definitions” (Alcock, 2009: 37). Therefore, while the entitlements approach accounts for the ability to be or not to be food secure, it does not explain how these endowments and accompanying exchange mappings, which are so central to achieving food security, come to be, why they vary, why they may be inadequate, or why they should count in the first place (Omosa, 1998). However, it has been well asserted that part of Sen’s success in influencing

contemporary food security discourse should be attributed to the way *Poverty and Famines* is presented as a formal economic theory that is accessible to non-specialists (Edkins, 2000: 47).

Political Economy

In the classical period of the 18th and 19th century the subject of economic theory was described through the ‘political economy’ (Rothschild, 1989) closely associated with the work of economists who adopted the key notions of Marx’s class processes or relationships. Though in the 20th century, the ‘social inequalities’ of this promising discipline were highly criticized even by Marxists and Social Democrats, ‘inequality’ at the national and international level continued to be found in most political economy research (Encyclopaedia of Food and Culture, 2010). More recently the increased involvement of the state, institutions and organisations in economic affairs, the increasing interests for systematic understanding of the interrelations between social, economic and political processes have expanded the usage of the term ‘political economy’ (Gabriel, 2002). Heron (2009) offers a very comprehensive definition: “political economy is a field of knowledge that has provided abstract and context-specific understandings of key transformations in social conditions of production and consumption, the state at all levels and forms, interactions among state–economy–civil society (community)”. Post-structuralist political economy provides an alternative to both orthodox (*neoclassical*) economic theory and Marxian influenced political economy (Gabriel, 2002). Modern ‘political economy’ looks at complex interrelationships among economic and political organizations, institutions, policies, practices and outcomes (Robinson, 2009). More concretely, it includes “wealth distribution, social patterns of accumulation, inter-class relations, the role of the state, patterns of land ownership and control over access to natural resources” (Neumann, 2009).

The food-related quest of political economy addresses famine, poverty and hunger as class phenomena, and correspondingly produces explanations of vulnerability as forms of ‘class knowledge’ (Wolff and Resnick, 1987). It examines how colonialism, class crisis, property rights, markets, power and policy interact with the everyday culture and politics of communities in the developing world. Drawing on the Marxian idea, here class refers to the appropriation and distribution of surplus from producers (Watts and Bohle, 1993). Wolff and Resnick (1987:150) argue that “the ‘fundamental class processes’ by which some members of society produce necessary and surplus labour – is distinguished from ‘subsumed class processes’ which refers to the distribution of surplus by the appropriators”. In other words, the distribution of assets (economic differentiation) is related to the various means by which surplus labour is appropriated (taxes, interest, unequal exchange, patriarchal relations), that is to say the specific forms of household reproduction over time (de Janvry, 1980). Political economy in this point of view, also presents the two basic aspects of modernization:

commercialization (social form in which the market develops) on the one hand, and proletarianisation (the historically specific way in which a wage earning class is produced) on the other hand (Bush, 1988; Watts, 1983). This inclination is raised under capitalism as a result of structural contradictions and conflicts between classes, between the relations and forces of production, and between accumulation and production conditions (Harvey, 1982; O'Connor, 1988). Political economy, in other words, attempts to explain how and why specific forms of entitlement and empowerment are produced and reproduced in society (Watts and Bohle, 1993). In economic space, vulnerability to food security here carefully disaggregates poverty and in contrast, it emphasises the importance of seasonal variation and the ways to gain access to resources and food across occupational groups (Davies, 1996). In political and structural historical space, powerlessness and exploitation cause some people to have a limited set of entitlements that in turn produces direct food and livelihood vulnerability.

Political economy, however, has been criticized as having a number of blind spots in its critical vision, but its great strength is that it provides the interaction of social, economic and political processes in power and wealth distribution among diverse groups and individuals in a society under capitalism over time and the processes of development of underdevelopment.

Political Ecology

Since the 1970s, the addition of an ecological perspective to political economy has been a bonus (Robbins, 2004). 'Political ecology'¹⁷ has emerged from the works of cultural ecology (Grossman, 1998) and looks at people's beliefs and behaviours in examination of human environment interrelations (Walker, 2005). Over the years, many scholars have defined political ecology in different ways (see, Escobar, 1999; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Bryant, 1998; Robbins 2004) but the central focus is the linkage between politics and human-environment relations¹⁸. These interests include: (1) nature/culture interactions; (2) analyses of the capabilities and agency of local actors; (3) how the interactions, from the local to the global, are determined by social, cultural, environmental and economic elements; and (4), how historic activities determine and continue to create the range of inequalities that exist today (Biersack and Greenberg 2006). To introduce the political into the environmental problems, political ecology does not consider only the political sphere, but also how power is exercised through a range of aspects including control of land and other resources, ideas, labour or production (Robbins, 2004).

¹⁷ Political ecology as a term was first used by Wolf (1972).

¹⁸ Blaikie and Brookfield's in their book *Land Degradation and Society* (1987) offer the first widely used definition: "political ecology combines concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources and also within classes and groups within society itself" (p. 17).

During its early phase from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, most political ecologists used Neo-Marxist approaches to refute the dominant narratives of the Neo-Malthusians who blamed the dwindling food supply on capitalistic tendencies and such critiques continue to be common and important subject matter in political ecology (Robbins, 2004). The next phase of political ecology originated in the late 1980s from the ‘poststructuralism’ and ‘discourse’ theory (Escobar, 1996) to work out more complex forms of how power relations mediate the human environment interaction (Bryant and Bailey, 1997). Here political and economic forces and conflicts are considered as the contiguous causes of environmental degradation (Gezon and Paulson, 2005). For example, the core problem of food security is an interrelation of complex natural, economic and socio-political factors such as weather patterns, political decisions, demand, scientific knowledge, and economic restructuring of supply (Bakker & Bridge, 2006). For example, DeWalt (1998) used a political ecology approach to examine the interaction and contradictions among different social, economical and political process of health, nutrition and demography as well as the multiple uses and abuses of natural resources (DeWalt 1998: 295; see also, Stonich 1993; Stonich and DeWalt 1996). On the other hand, while resource use may be ecologically degrading and socially devastating for some, it may mean profitability for others (Ferguson and Derman, 2005). It is recognition of the material embeddedness of social action. The poststructuralist approach questions powerful scientific, formal and state knowledge, which has controlled and impoverished so many people (Escobar, 1996; Blaikie, 1999).

During the 1990s the work of political ecology focused on micro-level assessments in order to know the heterogeneous formulations and responses to the socio-nature changes (Gardner, 2005). Access and control over productive resources and their implications for livelihoods security is also a major focus for political ecologists (Watts, 2000). Political ecologists strive to uncover flaws in dominant approaches to the environment supported by corporation, national and international bodies functioning to show the adverse impact of the policies and the conditions of market, particularly from the standpoint of local populations, marginalized and vulnerable groups (Robbins, 2004). In this context, political ecology is a key approach to studying food security and analysing the myriad acts of power present in society (Ivanoff, 2012). Looking at power means acknowledging unequal relations as well as the complexities and uncertainties of what determines food security at the household level. Along with this, by the mid-1990s, a call for a ‘feminist political ecology’ stressed that gender relations to understanding resource use, access, power and environmental meanings and gender can play a role in scientific knowledge construction, equal distribution of rights and grassroots activism (Agarwal, 1997; Rocheleau *et al.*, 1996). Political ecology understands how the interactions of natural and social factors influence the nutritional condition of households (Ivanoff, 2012).

Lately, political ecologists have come to examine how particular knowledge regarding society and nature allows and constrains what is seen to be realistic and possible (Robbins, 2004). Political ecology is thus moving in exciting new directions to gain an understanding of the material and discursive practices that are fundamental to a proper understanding of social injustice and inequity (Bryant, 1998). This emerging research agenda allows us to understand voices from local or household level of food preference, nutrition and access (Finnis, 2007) considering that they vary according to gender, age, education, labour divisions within the family, occupation, socio-economic status, and experience (Callens and Seiffert, 2003). Local political ecology¹⁹ thus provides the multiple factors that limit the decision-making capabilities of households. It has implications for future development projects to combat food insecurity and malnutrition. Non-governmental organizations have recently been conducting research to address subjective accounts of food security in a way that addresses the myriad of challenges that households live with on a daily basis²⁰. However, despite this, there have been only a limited number of works on the political ecology of food security, nutrition, and agriculture (Finnis, 2007; Ivanoff, 2012).

2.6 Synthesis of the theoretical framework

From the discussion in section 2.2 and in light of the above three theoretical positions (entitlements, political economy and political ecology), it can be said that households' vulnerability to both seasonal and chronic food insecurity and hunger favour a multi-causal explanation. Instead of separating them, it explicitly recognises the strong links between 'nature focused' and 'society focused' approaches²¹ (Devereux, 1993). Watts and Bohle (1993:62) noted that each theoretical position is typically associated with specific sorts of causality, specific sorts of mechanisms and tendencies, and specific concepts of vulnerability and crisis. In fact, the seasonality-hunger-vulnerability nexus can be explored in terms of structures, mechanisms and events. A summary of this adopted concept is thus given in Table 2.2. Though the space and shape of vulnerability to the Monga is fundamentally relational with

¹⁹ Based on work of Chambers (1997) and in line with Rocheleau *et al.* (1996), the political ecologists Warren, Batterbury and Osbahr (2001) proposed a local political ecology approach emphasising the importance of local decision-making and local context.

²⁰ When addressing food security strategies, it is important to interpret these strategies in the context of the overall decisions that aim to meet a diversity of needs. Households are always balancing conflicting interests and risks in order to survive in both the short and longer terms (FAO 2005:6), and food strategies are an important aspect of the whole (Ivanoff, 2012).

²¹ To simplify the chaos of several theories, Sen (1982) grouped all theories into two sets of approaches to 'the food problem' (see, Sen, 1982: 447).

Table 2.2: Summary of the adopted concept and theories of the food-hunger crisis and the Monga vulnerability.

Crisis Concept	Conception of Food Crisis	Causal Variables	Scope of Explanation	Mechanisms	Theoretical Position
Conjunctural (Sporadic, contingent)	Food exchange crisis	Declining command over food	Proximate Causes (trigger, external to the food system)	Endowments Capability Natural disasters Legal rights	ENTITLEMENT
Structural (Processual, necessary)	Food consumption Crisis Food Production And reproduction crisis	Powerlessness/ Poverty Social relation of production	Ultimate causes (Structural, internal to the food system)	Enfranchisement Marginalisation Institutions of access and control Crisis Proneness Class analysis Political Ecology	POLITICAL ECONOMY /POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Source: Adapted and modified after Watts and Bohle, 1993.

Note: The relationship between causal powers and their effects is not fixed; rather, is contingent and open and the same mechanism may sometimes produce different events and conversely the same type of event may have different causes in actual cases. Their relative weights can explain the distribution of food insecurity and security between different regions and social groups in the real world (Geest and Dietz, 2004:127).

mass poverty, it is also beyond ‘disaggregating poverty’ (Swift, 1989: 8), associated with both short term (conjunctural) and long-term (structural) changes in ‘social production and distribution mechanisms’ (Ghose, 1989: 127). The literature discussed in section 2.4 suggests that the northwest region of Bangladesh is a marginal, peripheral/dependent and crisis-prone region. The vulnerable groups in this society are the resource poor and those vulnerable to market disturbances, the powerless, and the exploited. Their vulnerability to food entitlement decline results from the effects of natural disasters,²² the low productivity of their livelihood system, and from a situation of exploitation or powerlessness. Within livelihood groups, certain social groups, like female-headed households, women in male-headed households, the elderly, children, and households in the *char* areas can be additionally vulnerable because of limited rights and powerlessness (Bohle *et al.*, 1994:42). In an agrarian food surplus region like northwest Bangladesh, the agricultural seasonality translates into economic seasonality through the market mechanism in income and smooth consumption, while polarized state policies have further marginalised poor households from access to food (Vuong, 2012). Households face a food exchange crisis, a food consumption crisis and a food (re) production crisis. As the household is regarded as a social organisation of confrontation and the reproduction of the power and privileges (Narayan *et al.*, 1999) that people perform in everyday life (Bruce and Lloyd, 1995), household-level vulnerability to both chronic and seasonal food insecurity is therefore shaped by several external and internal factors. This is because, in relation to social and economic differences (Nguthi, 2007; Karuhanga, 2008), the asset endowments, livelihood activities, and strategies to cope with the situation and outcomes among the marginal households differ significantly (Nguthi, 2007).

Households also experience external vulnerability with the lack of access to and quality of institutional structures and social services, such as extension services, credit, markets, and health facilities, which in turn aggravate the internal vulnerability and jeopardise their food and livelihood security. Food and asset prices move counter-cyclically through the year, so that the value of assets is lowest during annual hunger seasons like the Monga when the need for food is greatest (Devereux, 1993:43). A clear indicator of a household’s relative food security is the extent to which it is subject to the economic pressures created by agricultural seasonality. Though the marginal households challenge their economic hardship using their own limited coping and with the help of agency to enhance their resilience and improve their position within the social arena, however, this may be done in such a way that it actually increases their exposure to the food and livelihood insecurity (Devereux, 1993: 43). When

²² The Safer World (2008) showed in their recent report on Human Security that “Bangladeshis consider environmental disasters (51 per cent) only after economic conditions (69 per cent) as the second major threat to their security” (Ray-Bennett *et al.*, 2010: 585).

households are unable to meet their food needs and hunger makes them sink further into poverty (Vuong, 2012), as Chambers *et al.* (1981:223) succinctly state, “seasonality presents contexts which bring poverty to periodic crisis”.

2.7 Conclusion

Though seasonal hunger is often a precursor to famine, agriculture seasonality itself is not a ‘cause of famine’; perhaps the real distinction between seasonal hunger and famine is simply the scale of impact. ‘Seasonal hunger season’ therefore is taken to refer to a period that is characterised by the multiple severe impacts of various disasters, the perpetuation of low incomes, indebtedness, chronic malnutrition among the poor, and in turn, this periodic dispossession increases their vulnerability to chronic poverty and food insecurity. Thus, seasonal hunger should be defined by looking at both its immediate and its structural causes (Ogbu, 1973). However, it is noteworthy to mention here that this thesis does not have any aim to test the theory that proposed by Watts and Bohle (1993) or to develop any model through the empirical data. Rather, the above discussion of the different concepts and theories is mainly to gain a better understanding of socio-economic and political relations to a larger crisis of social reproduction, and the intricate causal relationships and complex effects that (re)produce seasonal hunger and chronic food insecurity in a marginal subsistence based rural economy like the northwest Bangladesh. This research hopes that conceptualising seasonal hunger such a way of continuous process has implications for thinking about vulnerability to chronic food insecurity and the marginalisation process of the poor – its status at any given time will be a function of past, present and expected future catastrophic events. To determine the Monga vulnerability as a central aim of this research, the following chapters will therefore, build on this theoretical framework through integrating the literature sources with contemporary field data collected within this thesis. The next chapter sets out the methodology used in this thesis to investigate the research questions.

Chapter Three

Research approach, Research settings and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an explanation of the strategic aspects of methodological design and the choices of data collection tools that I used in this study in order to address the research questions posed in chapter one. I begin with a description that reveals my motivations for the adopted methodological approach to explore Monga vulnerability. Then I move on to how the fieldwork was facilitated and carried out. I illustrate the study sites, key informants and respondents, and explain the basis and procedure for their selection. My fieldwork in very distinct socio-cultural and environmental rural settings of the northwest region yielded vivid stories, pictures, and a spectrum of experiences about the household and communities' interaction with the Monga. I describe the specific research methods that I used to capture the data, my experiences, and my own reflections in this regard. Then I elaborate the approaches to analysis of data and information. Finally, I denote the constraints and limitations which I faced during the fieldwork and the measures I took to deal with them. As methodology reflects an 'overall research strategy' (Mason, 1996: 19), through these descriptions my aim is to rationalise the procedures that were involved in my fieldwork.

3.2 Methodological approach: exploring hunger through qualitative methods

The nature of my research is grounded in the field of qualitative research, particularly ethnographic methods, in order to obtain a deeper understanding all the way through households' experiences and social process (Rofe and Winchester, 2010). Here I argue that understanding the hunger situation in northwest Bangladesh during the Monga is not merely a 'clinical sign of malnutrition' (Kennedy, 2003). My conceptual framework in this regard influenced me to choose a qualitative approach along with the selection of methods. The three paradigms shift in the conceptualisation of 'food security' (see section 2.2) – from food availability and utilization to inadequate access; from a 'food first' to a 'livelihood outcome'; and from 'objective' measurements to 'subjective' perspectives (i.e. people's perceptions), entailed a priority to examine households' food insecurity in a wider and holistic perspective. Methodological debates also entrenched polarised positions in food security scholarship – for example, quantitative (objective) and qualitative (subjective) accounts of hunger (Johnston, 2000). Maxwell (1996) argued that qualitative aspects are omitted from traditional nutritional

measures (i.e. anthropometric measures²³). The epistemology behind this argument was that nutritional adequacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for food security as it is not just the quantity of food entitlement that matters, but also the "quality" of entitlement (ibid: 159). There are other issues, for examples, the issues of rights, household food habits, preference, cultural acceptability, human dignity (Eide *et al.*, 1986), and even autonomy and self-determination (Barracough, 1991) need to address. These can be found through qualitative investigations as ethnographic methods seek to "understand cultural phenomena from the viewpoint of the people who create and use them, looking from the inside out" (Handwerker, 2001:4). My adopted framework on vulnerability to food security also clearly suggests that hunger in greater Rangpur is a situation in which a certain group of people cannot obtain an adequate amount of food that indicates the existence of a social and political problem. Tolossa (2005) argues that qualitative food security related data involves people's preferences, knowledge, social networks, power relations, and political participation which cannot be accounted for in numerical terms. Webb *et al.*, (2006: 1405S) add a point that a growing emphasis on fundamental measurement as opposed to reliance on distal, proxy measures also led a considerable shift from quantitative to qualitative measures.

However, the subjective assessment of food security rejects the relevance of positivist scientific methods of enquiry in the social arena (Carr, 2006). The 'constructionists' hold the view that investigations must use empathic understanding of those being studied, and from which social reality is constructed. In particular, contemporary food security research emphasises flexibility, diversity, preoccupation with discourse and language, has a prejudice in favour of local knowledge (Sayer, 1992:1) and strategies, and uses qualitative research methods that are characteristically post-modern (Table 3.1). Rigorous research in the 1990s also led to the development of qualitative methodologically²⁴ sophisticated and empirically grounded measurement (Frongillo, 1999), and showed strong support for ascertaining the reliability of subjective measures of the sensation of hunger (See, Lappalainen *et al.*, 1990; Mattes and Friedman, 1993; Rolls, 1996) without necessarily measuring the objective parameters of 'malnutrition'. This led to the realization that qualitative methods are needed as they reflect the perception of food security and hunger by those affected, e.g. the poor. A

²³ Conventional approaches to food security have relied on objective measurement: "target" levels of consumption (Siamwalla and Valdes, 1980); average required daily calorie intake (Reardon and Matlon, 1989); or, nutritionally adequate supply of food (Staatz, 1990), through to anthropometric in nature. The notion of nutritional adequacy is itself problematic. For any individual, nutritional requirement is a function of age, health, size, workload, environment and behaviour (Payne *et al.*, 1994). Estimates of calorie requirements for average adults and children with average activity patterns in average years are subject to constant revision (Payne, 1990). Adding adaptation strategies complicates the calculation (Payne *et al.*, 1994). Estimating precise calorie needs for different groups in the population is therefore difficult.

²⁴ Two of the most influential research studies were Radimer, Olson and Campbell, (1990) and Wehler, Scott and Anderson (1992).

definitional shift in food security was also found due to increasing use of qualitative approach, for example Maxwell (1988: 10) stated that “food security will be achieved when the poor and vulnerable, particularly women and children and those living in marginal areas, have secure access to the food they want”. This also reflects my case of the Monga-prone areas.

Table 3.1: Changing knowledge and domains of the application of qualitative methods in food security.

	Objective Measures	Subjective Measures
Underlying reality	Simple, uniform	Complex, diverse
Objectives	Preoccupation with macro	Preoccupation with micro
Research approach	Measure Survey Reductionist Deduction Abstract models Aggregate	Listen Participatory and qualitative Holistic Induction Complex reality Disaggregate
Planning approach	Plan Model Top-down Centralize	Enable Interact Bottom-up Decentralize
Implementation	Blue-print Role culture Standardization	Process Task culture Flexibility, innovation

Source: Modified after Maxwell, 1996.

In geography, qualitative methodologies span a wide range of empirical work and different philosophical and epistemological underpinnings (Dwyer and Limb, 2001) that fundamentally depend on watching people on their own ground, and interacting with them in their own language and on their own terms, and so these methods are participatory in nature (Kirk and Miller, 1986). Snape & Spencer (2003:7) stress the broad recognition of qualitative methods such as observation, interviewing and documentary analysis as the ways of holistic understanding of research participants’ views and actions in the context of their lives as a whole. The growing interest of study about the non dominant, socially excluded or marginalised groups (Smith, 2001) also increased the uses of qualitative methods in academic human geography (Ekinsmyth, 2002). It is well established that in geographical scholarship qualitative research is now used to address a wide range of issues, events, and places (Hay, 2010). Crang (2005:255) states that “there is ... a maturity about qualitative methods in geography”. As these are methods of discovery (Fielding, 1993) and the life or behaviour under study becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close it (Goffman, 1961), the application of qualitative methods within a geographical framework thus offers enormous potential in researching the subjective characteristics of seasonal food insecurity and hunger at households level, which is my principal unit of analysis. Crang and Cook (2007: 15)

argue that ‘subjectivity’ can provide a position out of ‘which more rigorous understandings can be built.’ Kennedy (2005) stated that qualitative methods are more suitable and provide simple and direct measures of hunger and food security than other proxy measures. This paradigm supports qualitative approaches and methods to address food insecurity (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) where the issue is poverty and particularly, apolitical in nature, like the Monga in northwest Bangladesh. Jensen (2003) added that there are many advantages to the qualitative measures of food security and hunger such as grounding in science; once developed, ease of administration; low respondent burden and direct measurement of the phenomenon of interest. But Kennedy (2003) stated that most of the qualitative measures of food security and nutritional status have, to date, emerged primarily from industrialized countries. Likewise, the qualitative approach is mostly missing in food security and hunger research in Bangladesh²⁵. That also motivated me to use qualitative approach in questioning the Monga vulnerability in greater Rangpur.

Despite having its own credibility, applying qualitative research methods faces academic and disciplinary criticism on different fronts. For example, as oppositional to quantitative methods (Hay, 2010), they are thought to have subordinate status in the scientific arena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008), or to be merely an anecdotal supplement (Hammersly, 1992), only exploratory, and based upon a journalistic approach (Denzin, 1997; Huber, 1995). However, Hay (2010: 17) strongly advocated qualitative research by saying that “qualitative geographers have been often been on the defensive, aiming to present their studies, as legitimate in their own right and as research that produces not just case studies or anecdotal evidence but that has added immensely to the geographical literature through powerful forms of geographical explanation, including analysis, theory building, and geographic histories”. The contemporary use of qualitative methods in human geography is positioned in complex ways – ontology (beliefs about the world) and epistemology (ways of knowing the world) are linked to the methods that geographers choose to use for research (Grabich, 2007).

In this research I also use some quantitative data collected through various published and unpublished secondary sources, but not aimed to be forms of ‘triangulation’. Rather, they add rigour, breadth and increase the richness and depth of my research. Finally, it is important to mention here that my interest in using qualitative methods does not seek to replace or

²⁵ The most prominent example of qualitative measurement scale for food insecurity in Bangladesh is the work of Webb, Coates and Houser (2001) of Tufts University. They worked with World Vision in Bangladesh. Unlike in the United States measurement scale, they showed that several distinct scales are needed to address the complex food insecurity situation of developing countries. They used mainly four core concepts; quantity of food, quality of food, security of predictability, and acceptability in acquisition. The same scale developed in Bangladesh was then applied in Burkina Faso (Cornell University and Africare team), in Guatemala (Save the Children, UK), Kenya and Ethiopia (CARE). There are other participatory methodologies such as the food economy approach, group ratings, dietary diversity and coping strategies indices have been used and tested at the local level.

substitute widely accepted quantitative measures such as anthropometric survey data, household expenditure surveys, dietary intake assessments, or the FAO methodology²⁶.

3.3 Fieldwork design and process

3.3.1 Fieldwork period

Fieldwork is an essential part of qualitative research as it explores “things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 4-5). I carried out a six month long fieldwork in one session from the first week of October, 2011 to the end of March, 2012. My preference of selecting that period was based on my aim and research questions and in relation to the literature review on the Monga, as Miles and Huberman (1984: 42) argue that qualitative fieldwork must be open to unsuspected phenomena which may be concealed by ‘prior instrumentation’. All we need are ‘some orientating questions, some headings for observations [and] a rough and ready document analysis form’ (ibid: 42). Based on the literatures as I discussed in the chapter one and two, I then designed my field work to cover both the *Kartiker* Monga and the *Chaitter* Monga. I started fieldwork at the time of the ongoing *Kartiker* Monga season in the entire Rangpur region followed by the harvest and post harvest time of *Aman* (a normal and good time for the poor as the literature suggests, see section 1.2.2) and the short period of the *Chaitra’er* Monga. This period of fieldwork allowed me to collect a variety of empirical materials in exploring everyday Monga vulnerability in northern Bangladesh that constantly link theory and the field.

3.3.2 An introduction of the study areas

I carried out my study in five Monga-affected villages (Figure 3.1, and Table 3.2) of the Rangpur region. To select these villages I used purposive or theoretical sampling²⁷ rather than the ‘statistical probability approach’ based on the research problems and my conceptual framework. Purposive sampling is useful in selecting study sites for situations where there is a need to quickly reach a study site and targeted groups (where proportionality is not the primary concern) with one or more specific predefined sites in accordance with the theoretical

²⁶ The FAO measure of food deprivation is referred to as the prevalence of undernourishment, is based on a comparison of usual food consumption expressed in terms of dietary energy (kcal) with certain energy requirement norms. The FAO has been undertaking this task in its annual report on “The State of Food Insecurity in the World” (SOFI), which was first issued in 1999. The latest edition was published in 2012 (see, <http://www.fivims.net/EN/ISS.htm>).

²⁷ Theoretical sampling and purposive sampling are treated as synonyms. Indeed, the only difference between the two procedures applies when the ‘purpose’ behind ‘purposive’ sampling is not theoretically defined (Silverman, 2000).

standpoint²⁸ (ACASP, 2012). My ultimate goal was to add rigour to possible empirical findings that are derived from data arising from the fullest range of participants and settings (Higginbottom, 2004: 17). In the first instance, considering the location of existing pockets of severe Monga-prone areas²⁹ (for example, we saw that *char* villages are more vulnerable; see, section 1.1.3), I emphasised the selection of two categories of Monga-prone villages: mainland villages³⁰ and *char* villages. As *chars* are of two types, i.e. island *chars* and attached *chars* (see, footnote 5 in Chapter 1), I decided to select three types of distinct villages: mainland village, island *char* village, and attached *char* village. However, to find out which villages I should consider, following Crang and Cook's (2007:17-18) suggestion, before going to the Bangladesh I made some early contacts at the organisational level, mainly two NGOs, namely Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS) in Rangpur, and Udayankur Sheba Sangstha (USS) in Nilphamari, both working on the Monga. After going to Bangladesh I further contacted more organisations and key informants to select suitable study areas. In the initial stages, according to my key informants' opinions, and consistent with the current literature on the Monga, I identified various possible research sites, particularly from suitable five representative unions and upazilas³¹ of the five districts. These were Bandebar Union of Rowmari Upazila, Kurigram District, Laxmichap Union of Nilphamari Sadar Upazila, Nilphamari District, 6 No. Gangachara Union of Gangachara Upazila, Rangpur District, Belka Union of Sundarganj Upazila, Gainabandha District, and *Char* Bhotmari Union of Kaliganj Upazila, Lalmonirhat District. I then contacted upazila and union level officials such as the upazila and union chairman, members, upazila level officers, and local NGOs as well as local people to know their opinions/views. My primary considerations in this regards were the local

²⁸ It is noteworthy to mention here that my study villages' selection was designed to explore their household Monga vulnerability. According to the BBS (2010), the Monga-affected five districts of Rangpur comprise a total of 5427 villages (1243 villages in Gaibandha; 1903 villages in Kurigram; 476 villages in Lalmonirhat; 370 villages in Nilphamari; and 1435 villages in Rangpur). This also influenced my approach of purposive sampling rather than a statistical probability approach.

²⁹ The FAO (2008) has suggested that in most rural areas, a useful starting point for selecting a study site is to divide up affected areas into different 'zones', within which people share broad common livelihood-sustaining activities and goals.

³⁰ The villages are located on the mainland – the continuous extent of land that includes the greater part of the country or territory, as opposed to detached *char* and offshore islands. *Char* people usually call the mainland as *Kaim*.

³¹ For administrative purposes the country is divided into division, district and upazila. The upazila again comprises of union, mouza and village. The union is the lowest political administrative body, run by an elected chairman and members. On the other hand, the mouza, the revenue village, is the smallest administrative unit of the census. A typical union generally consists of about 10-20 villages or more. A village is loosely used to denote a large habitation with a cluster of households. A mouza may cover one or more villages – village boundaries are highly irregular in shape and usually have no specific criteria of delineation. During the field work I found that administrative boundaries of villages are basically defined by the villagers, and sometimes interchangeable with those of the mouzas. However, villagers know about their village, its size and boundaries. After several discussions with villagers I found that the 'community' or 'village' (used indifferently) correspond to the particular Union Chairmen and member's jurisdictions but in some cases a village has its own head, mainly from the elderly or powerful elite. Therefore, the village is a self-governing institution and the whole inter-dependent relationship is worked out and maintained by a system of custom, authority and mutual obligation (Banglapedia, 2006).

severity of the Monga, possible access to the field site, and the suitability of carrying out fieldwork. Moreover, I aimed to document diverse variations within the mainland and *char* villages, particularly in different conditions as well as important common patterns that cut across variations (William and Round, 2007), thus to focus on both homogeneity and heterogeneity. I also emphasised seeking villages that would provide an understanding of the situation of some of the following phenomenal variation (Sandelowski, 1995):

- villages that had balanced representation of different Monga-affected livelihood groups but with vulnerability differing;
- as disasters, mainly flood, riverbank erosion and drought play a significant role in marginalisation process of the poor and increase the Monga vulnerability, it was important to think about the different disaster-proneness of the villages;
- different socio-economic settings and their relation with the Monga; and whether there has been some improvement of the Monga situation in recent years;
- existence or non existence of different GO, NGOs interventions that were designed for Monga eradication and enhancing livelihoods. This was to focus not only on household experiences but more explicitly on the organizational approaches/programmes for addressing the existing Monga and food insecurity, and to evaluate their effectiveness and other related issues;
- places that could give me as much information as possible; access, feasibility and relevance were considered here, along with ethical considerations. As I was intending to use different qualitative methods for data collection, it was an important challenge to build rapport with the targeted groups, thus a convenient location and contacts who could facilitate entry into the community including responsive communities were considered.

After discussing the above issues with my key informants, according to their opinions I elected six villages, among these were two mainland villages: Khadaimari village of Rowmari Upazila, Akaluganj Bazar of Nilphamari Sadar Upazila; two villages were on island *chars*: Dhamur *char* of Gangachara Upazila, Aleker *char* of Sundarganj Upazila; and the other two villages were attached *char* village: Dakhshin *Char* of Kaliganj Upazila, and *Char* Nilar Para of Gangachara Upazila. I then carried out on-site visits as reconnaissance surveys to check their suitability for conducting my fieldwork. I found that the attached *char* people are nowadays getting, to some extent, better access and facilities, like the mainland villages have hitherto. They also claim that they are no longer a *choura*³². In this context, I came to a point of considering ‘theoretical saturation’ (Hay, 2010), where more case villages would merely enrich the number rather than the essence of the target participants and therefore not add much in addressing the research questions. Thus I finally decided to take only one attached *char* village and so five villages in total (Figure 3.1). The selected study areas including the

³² In Bengali, an inhabitant of a *char* is called *choura*. Generally people of the mainland have distinct perceptions about the *choura* and their culture, mainly negative.

theoretical basis for their selection along with a short description of the research communities are given in Table 3.2. However, the detailed physical, socio-economic, and political features of the study villages and their association with the Monga vulnerability emerged and conglomerated throughout the following chapters and they will be recounted in relation to the chapter's specific objectives. Finally, I would say that through the entire process of selecting study villages I was unbiased and tried to ensure a balanced relationship between sampling strategy and conceptual framework, reconnaissance survey (Wainwright, 1997), feasibility (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in fieldwork time context, and the concept of 'representativeness' rather than focusing on theoretical sampling (Jorgensen, 1989).

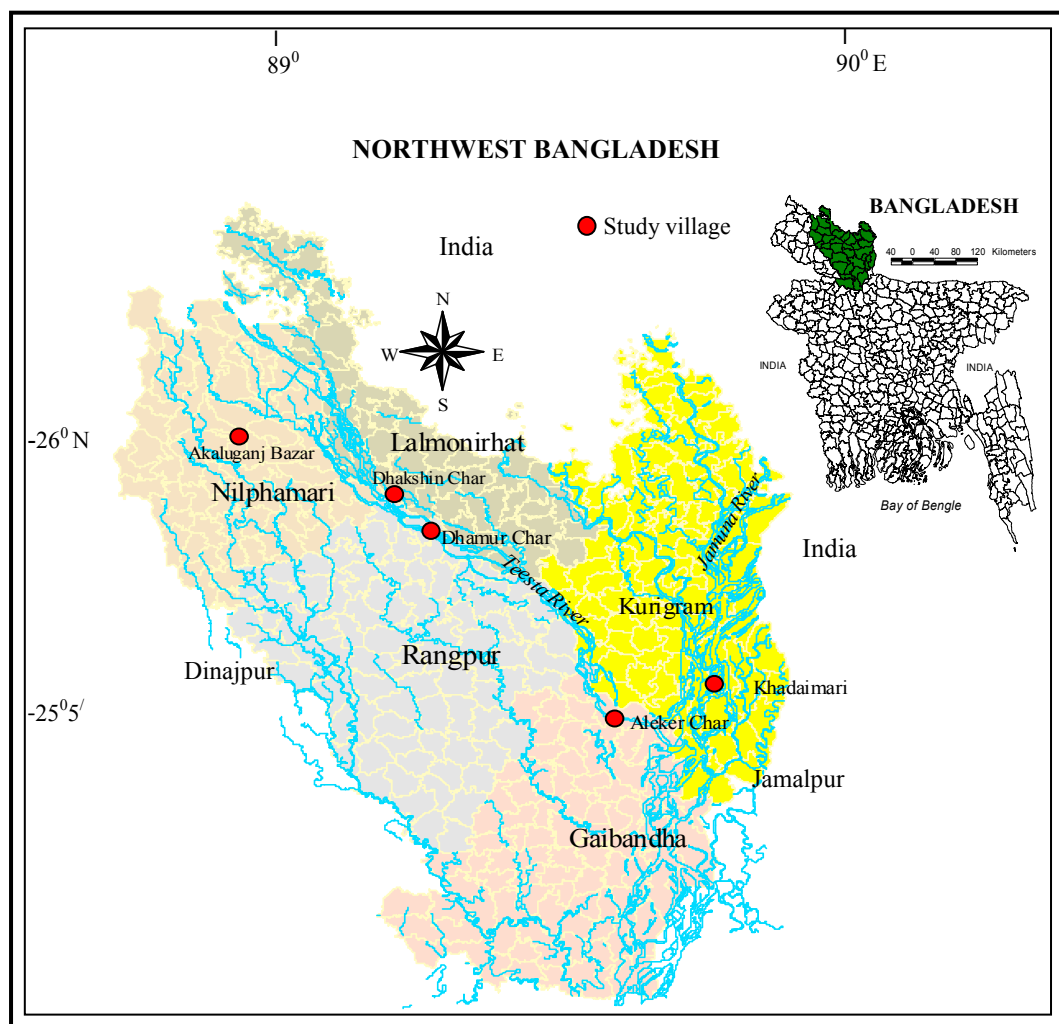


Figure 3.1: Map showing the location of the study villages.

Table 3.2: A short description of the study villages.

Village types	Village name	Union, Upazila, and District	Some important criteria for selection as study village	Village characteristics*
Mainland village	Khadaimari	Bandebar Union Rowmari Upazila Kurigram District	Highly riverbank erosion-prone area	<p>The village of Khedaimari is located on the eastern bank of the River Brahmaputra-Jamuna and the western side of the Rowmari Sadar Union of Rowmari Upazila. Among the upazilas of Kurigram district, Rowmari and <i>Char</i> Rajibpur are considered as backward upazilas. They are located adjoining the Indian state of Meghalaya, and they are economically detached (due to Jamuna River) from the mainland district administration services and joined only by a strip of land with the Jamalpur district of Bangladesh. Because the village is situated at an inaccessible tip, administrative services are naturally scanty. This village is Muslim dominated (99%). Approximate households are 220, with an average family size is 5 to 6. The education rate is very low compared to other villages of the union (16%), and women's literacy is exceptionally low. Agriculture dominated (99%) and livestock farming are the two major components sustaining livelihoods of the community. Males frequently go to Sadar Union to search for jobs as not so many non-farm jobs exist locally. The land is low-lying and subject to heavy seasonal flooding and erosion; it is very fragile and unstable. Prospects for diversified agriculture are bleak as the village has undergone changes due to riverbank erosion; only one crop dominates, mainly rice. Tobacco is a growing interest to small farmers nowadays. There is no industry. Migration to other districts is comparatively low due to poor communications. Despite some NGO activities, the precarious geographic instability and economic vulnerability of this village means that there is very little in terms of coping ability among the poor.</p>
			Remote mainland village in terms of lack of district administrative services; poor communication systems	
			Socio-cultural situation becomes worse during the Monga due to proximity of Indian border (unlawful activities increase)	
			No GO-offered social safety nets	
	Akaluganj Bazar	Laxmichap Nilphamari Sadar Upazila Nilphamari District	Drought-prone area	<p>The village is located in the Laxichap Union, which is about 15 kilometres away from Nilphamari district town. There are approximately 150 households and the average family size is 6. No visible facilities of modern life are present in this village though it is very near to the main town of Nilphamari. The topography is a little elevated. The village is a Hindu majority union, with Christians too and Muslims. The education situation is comparatively low (25 to 30%). Female education has increased in recent years. About 90% people are landless but dependent on agriculture or agricultural labour while a part of the labour force</p>
			First initiative of Community <i>Dhan</i> (Paddy) Bank for Monga eradication	
			Very close to the district administration but highly Monga-affected due to lack of	

Village types	Village name	Union, Upazila, and District	Some important criteria for selection as study village	Village characteristics*
			basic services	travel out of Nilphamari to do some other labouring jobs. Popular destinations include Dhaka, Mymensing, and Noakhali for seasonal migration. A recently established Community <i>Dhan</i> Bank for Monga eradication has caught GO and NGOs attention. Dominant agriculture is rice, but tobacco and winter vegetables interest marginal and small farmers. Irrigation is low. Women's involvement in non-farm activities is almost absent except in GO-offered seasonal earthen road construction. Male tendency to migrate to Dhaka increased after the establishment of the Jamuna Bridge. During the winter, severe cold waves may last for a couple of weeks and jeopardise livelihoods.
			No major industry; except rice mill	
			No relief offered as frequency of floods is low	
<i>Char</i> Village	Island <i>char</i>		Remote <i>char</i> of the Teesta River	This isolated <i>char</i> is located on the river course of Teesta, approximately 8 km from of the Teesta river embankment of the 6 No. Gangachara Union. It is a comparatively large <i>char</i> having approximately 200 households with an average of family size 6 to 7. Muslim-dominated village with Hindu minority. There is a primary school but no high school. Literacy rate is very low (10 to 15%). Landless farmers and agriculture day labourers constitute the major occupational groups. Households rear goats, cows and chickens but not for commercial purposes. Local village doctors (both homeopathic and allopathic) are available, but no health care centre exists. During the winter as the Teesta dries up, communications with the mainland are difficult as the only one way is on foot. Recent initiatives of NGOs in agriculture development changing the cropping calendar; usually two cropping seasons is the dominant practice. Non-farming activities are not prominent due to remoteness from the mainland. Migration to city areas is less prominent. Homestead gardening is possible but during the monsoon damaged by the flood water. The local power structure creates endemic violence in the village.
		Dhamur <i>Char</i>	Flooding every year	
		6 No. Gangachara Union Gangachara Upazila Rangpur	No basic services, no health centre, no market, no electricity Small scale short durational varieties (SDR) cultivation started for Monga eradication NGO initiative of pumpkin cultivation on the river bed of Teesta for Monga eradication by the Women and marginal farmers	
			Island <i>char</i> but near to the mainland of Sudarganj Union office	It is an isolated small <i>char</i> by the side of river Teesta. About 130 households live in the <i>char</i> , of whom 55 families arrived recently, shifting from other areas due to food shortages and land erosion. Habitation in the <i>char</i> started 25 to 30 years ago. The new households are scattered all around the <i>char</i> . Majority are Muslim (99%). NGOs initiated house plinth raising to cope with flood water. The literacy rate is very low and women are mostly illiterate. Children have to go to mainland schools including young girls and boys. Agriculture is practised
	Aleker <i>Char</i>	Belka Union Sundarganj Upazila Gaibandha District	Flood-prone area	
			No. of displaced people is high	

Village types	Village name	Union, Upazila, and District	Some important criteria for selection as study village	Village characteristics*
			<p>No basic services; no school and no health care facility, no electricity</p> <p>CLP (Chars Livelihoods Programme) of DFID (Department for International Development) working area for livelihood enhancement</p>	<p>by the villagers; however most of them are landless (90 to 95%). Landlords are absentees, living on the mainland or other northern districts. Rice is practised largely; tobacco and maize cultivation are prioritised by sharecroppers and small farmers. Young people prefer to work on the mainland as rickshaw/van pullers or day labour. Women and men both work in their own fields including the children. Cows are reared all over the <i>char</i>, being sourced through an NGO asset transfer scheme, but flooding creates serious problems in rearing them to a profitable stage of selling. No non-farm activities exist in the village. Fishing is a prominent occupation during the monsoon, but in winter it is not possible because the river bed dries up. Sanitation conditions have improved recently due to NGO intervention, but the majority still have no latrine facilities.</p>
	Attached <i>char</i>	Dakhshin <i>Char</i>	<p>Once island <i>char</i>, now attached <i>char</i> due to shifting of river Teesta</p> <p>Highly riverbank erosion prone and flood-prone area</p> <p>Better access to the mainland</p> <p>Small scale SDR cultivation for Monga eradication</p> <p>Monga effect is decreasing (according to the local elites)</p> <p>Male migration is high</p>	<p>The village has 110 households. The Teesta river flows on the western side of the village. Land type is medium and low. Literacy rate is comparatively better (25 to 30%). Girl's education is increasing. Among the peasants approximately 28% are landless. Agriculture-dominated village (80 to 85%); main crops are rice, tobacco, jute, potato, brinjal and ginger, but two crops dominate the village. Though it is an attached <i>char</i>, there is no health care centre and people have to go to upazila Sadar for health care. Village has better access to the union and upazila level. No industry exists, but being a tobacco cultivation area the tobacco company through middle men provides jobs to the women for making bidi (a sort of local cigarette). Women are engaged in jobs as agricultural labourers for 3-4 months. Sanitation situation is still bad, but a tubewell is available. People get GO-offered social safety nets, particularly VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding). Migration is practised by young people during the Monga. Some fish culture projects over large area have been developed by the rich landlord just within the embankments.</p>

***Note:** The information about the villages was obtained from my personal observation, informal discussion with the union Parishad members, local elite and local people, *matbar* of the *char* villages, secondary information from BBS, Agriculture Census of Bangladesh and other relevant documents. However, during the fieldwork I travelled to each village with the key informants and asked for basic information.

3.3.3 Fieldwork strategies and preparation

For an effective and successful fieldwork I considered many issues, as a careful research design is an important part of ensuring rigour in qualitative research (Gould, 1988; Mason, 1996). Overall I was flexible as the stages of my fieldwork might be changed, some stages could overlap, and other stages might well be inserted. I adopted different qualitative and ethnographic methods. These were participant observation, i.e. both informal discussions with the people in the community and intensive household observation in selected households; semi-structured in-depth interviews with household heads and organisational personnel from GOs and NGOs; and focus-group discussions (FGDs). Selecting these methods stood on the argument proposed by Hay (2010:72) that “in opting for a qualitative research design, we are influenced by the theories we are concerned with, by studies undertaken by other researchers in our interpretive communities that we have found interesting, and by the research questions we wish to ask – all of which are interrelated”. During the fieldwork, as some opportunities came up, I also accommodated some other formal and informal approaches like attending a round table discussion (RTD) and community level meeting of NGO beneficiaries, and arranging an informal mini-consultation meeting with NGO officials that not only enriched my data but also increased its reliability. Though before going to the field I developed content guides for all the methods, in the field I was flexible to accommodating any new theme into my guides if it emerged. A comprehensive research map is given in Annex I.

I was also purposeful in collecting quantitative data from published and unpublished sources, mainly to know the policy and institutional level information as well as to support my empirical findings. Giving emphasis to the original and authentic secondary sources of data, Corrigan and Sayer (1985:124) stated that “the centralisation of knowledge requires facts – and the legitimisation of some facts, and the methods used to collect them against other facts – to justify features and forms of policy” (cited in Cloke *et al.*, 2004: 42). It is noteworthy to mention here that published materials on the Monga and seasonal food insecurity, particularly on the Rangpur region, lack a focus at the household level. Most of the available literature adopts some form of regional perspective using different organisational longitudinal survey data that are quantitative in nature.

After arrival in Bangladesh I formulated a research team consisting of two female and two male research assistants to assist and facilitate my data collection. They were postgraduate level students in geography and they were from the northern region. This background helped them to realise the importance of the work and also be familiar with the research methods and process quickly. I provided them one week of intensive training with detailed guidelines. They also knew many new things about the northern region as they had been living that region since

their birth. However, considering gender in selecting research assistants was important. Being a Bangladeshi citizen and also as a Muslim, I was aware about potential gender issues that exist in rural Bangladesh. Generally, in rural settings womenfolk do not feel easy to talk and share with an unknown and unrelated male person. The institution of *Pardah*³³, to some extent, is yet a dominant social norm for women that plays a significant role in sustaining the “separate sphere” imagery in Bangladesh (Nahar, 2005: 60). Gender considerations for appointing female assistants helped me to get access to female respondents without denying local norms. All the research assistants helped me to collect village level information through their intensive involvement.

I collected data in different formats like direct observation, text in field diaries, audio recording/sounds, and photographs. My research assistants and I wrote our own research diaries and took notes on different aspects, like observational notes, methodological notes, and personal notes (Richardson, 1994). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 165) stated that “the construction of such notes ... contributes precisely to the sort of internal dialogue, or thinking aloud, that is the essence of reflexive ethnography”. Not only being a native speaker but also considering the only one suitable language of capturing the respondents’ voices, I collected all of my primary data in Bengali including taking any notes and writing field diaries. I used a digital voice recorder in all interviews and FGDs with proper permission of the respondents to compile the fullest recording (Whyte, 1982). Though Douglas (1985) argues that a voice recorder sometimes creates a formal situation that might inhibit natural responses, to avoid such potential problem, at the beginning of any interview and FGD session I ensured the respondents and participants about their anonymity and confidentiality. This made the informants comfortable and as the interview progressed, they became more forthcoming.

Throughout the fieldwork, I contacted with my supervisors by email at suitable intervals to inform them of my ongoing activities, problems, and progress as well as reporting on my collected data. I also got their quick reply with constructive feedback and suggestions that continuously helped me to follow my schedule with proper thoughts and ideas. I believe that in this way I documented all stages of my research processes and allowed my supervisors to know that my work could be considered dependable (Hay, 2010).

3.3.4 Approaches to select target participants

Consistent with the aim, research questions, and the time and guidelines for my fieldwork, in selecting samples, my first consideration was a small sample size. Here I followed

³³ In Bengali usage also, that literally means curtain but at the same time, it refers both to practice and ideology (or values) of the segregation of women from men (Nahar, 2005).

McCracken's (1988: 17) process of selecting respondents where he stated that "less is more". I was also convinced by Hay's (2010: 75) argument that conducting qualitative investigation with a small number of the 'right people' can provide significant insights into a research issue, produce a wealth of detailed information, and increase understanding of the situations studied (Patton and Westby, 1992). Unlike quantitative research, sample size is not intended to be representative in qualitative research since it is less concerned with generalization to large populations (Silverman, 2000); rather, emphasis is usually upon 'an analysis of meaning in specific contexts' (Robinson, 1998: 409). The simple advice of Patton (2002) remains accurate: there are few rules in qualitative inquiry related to sample size, and it depends on what is needed in the way of knowledge, on the purpose of the research, on its significance and for whom, and on logistics and resources. Thus, overall I gave emphasis to quality, richness and detail relevant data rather than quantity of respondents, although this reduces generalizability (Patton & Westby, 1992: 4).

My principal analysis unit was the 'household'. As a unit the 'household' has extensively been used in food security research since the focus on food security has changed globally (as stated in section 2.2). The household is an accessible unit where resources are united and decisions are taken about production, consumption and investment (Malleret-King, 2000). Like other south Asian societies, the household is the most accurate reflection of Bangladeshi social realities. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2010), a household is defined as a group of persons, related or unrelated, living together and taking food from the same kitchen. The most common definition of a typical household is similar to the sociological "common-cooking pot definition" of the household: "a group of persons sharing a home or living space, who aggregate, and share their incomes, as evidenced by the fact that they regularly take meals together" (Marshall, 1994: 121). During the field work, across all the villages I also found the same reflections in considering households as a 'unit'. Some criteria that are considered to be a typical household are given in Box 3.1

Box 3.1: Characteristics of a typical household

- If different nuclear families live under the same roof, eat 'in the same pot' and share the money, they are considered as one household. It occurs but rarely;
- If different families live under the same roof but eat separately they are considered as separate households;
- If people do not live under the same roof, and people from one house supported financially people in another house, for example a son supports his parents and/or siblings, they are considered as separate households.

Source: Malleret-King, 2000.

However, though the ‘household’ as a unit of analysis is widely used, more and more the underlying assumption of its homogeneity is questioned from several fronts (Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992 cited in Malleret-King, 2000). Mula (1999) stated that defining the household is an intractable theoretical problem (Messer, 1983). From a gender perspective, studies showed the great importance of considering the role of intra-household differences, particularly each member within a household in division of tasks, different access to resources and their constraints (i.e. to food), difference in decision-making ability (see, Kabeer, 1991; Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992; Slocum *et al.*, 1995). This heterogeneity may increase the household livelihood insecurity and may have impacts on the household’s vulnerability to food security (Malleret-King, 2000). However, by giving importance to the household in the Southeast Asian context, Rigg (2001: 85) suggests, “the criticisms levelled on the ‘household’ is not sufficient reason to reject the household as a useful unit of analysis as most Southeast Asians consider themselves to be members of households”. That is yet to be applicable in the context of Bangladesh. In a domestic sphere, people do reside and make livelihood decisions in ‘households’ as a contributor to and product of wider cultural and social processes (Ellis, 2000; Guyer and Peters, 1989 cite in Mula, 1999: 22). Despite having complexity in views or actions among its members, the household as a collective unit acts as if it is a single individual as reflected in their unified decisions (Maxwell and Smith, 1992).

My other unit was the ‘community/village people’. For consistency with household information, and to obtain the broadest range of information and perspectives on the subject of study (Kuzel, 1992: 37) of the Monga, I was particularly interested in village community views through the FGDs as Stewart *et al.* (2007: 41) treated the FGD as a form of “confirmatory method”. I followed the definition: "a group of people who consciously share a functional or moral link such as kinship, occupation, place of residence, religion or values" (Renard, 1991 cited in White *et al.*, 1994: 15). The definition mainly reflects an individual village community who are very socialised with others, and play a crucial symbolic role in generating people’s ‘sense of belonging’ (Crow and Allan 1994: 6). Such informal relationships ‘also enable [us] to navigate our way around the demands and contingencies of everyday living’ (Allan 1996: 2). I found that the ‘community’ or ‘village’ (used indifferently) corresponded to the particular Union Chairmen’s jurisdictions but some cases, a village has its own head, mainly an elderly or a powerful elite. Therefore, the village was a self governing institution and the whole interdependent relationship was worked out and maintained by a system of custom, authority and mutual obligation (Banglapedia, 2006).

I used purposive sampling in selecting a small number but ‘right’ sample of households for observation, semi-structured in depth interviews and participants for FGDs. Purposive

sampling enabled me to select those categories of households and village groups in relation with my theoretical position, most importantly the explanation or accounts which I intended to develop throughout this research (see, Mason, 1996: 93-94). I decided to consider four types of households; these are female-headed, wage labour-based, marginal and small farming based households as my conceptual and theoretical position suggested that according to degree of poverty and entitlement combinations they are the most 'fragile households' (Oshaug, 1985; see section 2.2.2) and vulnerable to the Monga and chronic food insecurity. I then purposively selected households for in-depth interviews and households for observations across the five study villages. Here it is noteworthy to mention that I did not consider any similar number of each type of household from each village for any specific methods; rather, I focused on the convenient, flexible and situations to be observed or interviewed (Bouma and Ling, 2004) as Gobo (2004) argues that purposive or theoretical sampling cannot be designed before embarking on the field work. I also used quota sampling and snowball techniques to select participants for the FGDs. Quota sampling enabled me to deliberately set the different subcategories of the participants as the literature suggests that within the household children, adolescent girls, women and aged people are more vulnerable in terms of food security, and even at the community level. Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (2009: 3) stated that "the research question and research design ultimately guide how the focus group is constructed". This helped me to know the maximum diverse range of people's perceptions, their vulnerability, adopted strategies to cope with the situations and livelihood opportunities that reflected the overall similarities and differences of their everyday concerns about the Monga. However, for selecting right and voluntary samples for the FGDs I used snowball techniques simultaneously. I always discussed with the initial contacts before selecting the next participants to suggest someone else who might be willing or appropriate for the study (Stratford, 2008). I got immense help from the organisational personnel, key informants and gatekeepers in introducing potential households and participants for the FGDs, however they did not influence me in the selection of my sample. Rather, I selected the research sample taking into account my theoretical standpoint that could best provide sufficient data and information to fulfil my research aim.

At the organisational level my focus was on the GO, NGOs, community organisations and other sources of expertise directly related to the seasonal Monga crisis in different spheres like the policy, programmes operation and executions, research and extension, and philanthropic activities on the one hand, and broadly involved in the food security, agriculture, rural development and poverty development on the other. I mainly considered those organisations who were working for Monga eradication in my selected villages so that I could obtain information about the Monga situation in the study villages and so increase the reliability of

the data that I collected through household interviews and FGDs. This also gave advantages in examining the role of organisations in Monga eradication through household experiences.

3.3.5 Situating myself as a researcher: gaining access, positionality, and ethical issues

One of the fundamental challenges for qualitative researchers is gaining entry to social settings and places, and overall, the relationship between the researcher and the community being studied (Nahar, 2005:7). Though I am a native, however, access to people in their marginal settings in northern Bangladesh was not easy, especially in a situation when a widespread Monga was occurring and some of the people whose common bondage is poverty were in tension due to managing at least one meal a day for their family. In this context, as a common but crucial strategy I used my key informants, who acted as gatekeepers, to facilitate opportunities to interact with the community in my chosen research villages (Hay, 2010: 250). From the beginning, my identity was ‘overt’ (Silverman, 2000: 198) and I approached the community of every village purely as an academic researcher and academician. But at the initial stages I found that most of the people thought I was from an NGO and there to give relief or offering something, as they see this every year during the Monga. When I was unable to provide them anything, they became disappointed. In the *char* villages I had more and different problems in making a good rapport with the community than in the mainland villages. As Baqee (1998: 48) showed, “*char* life is tough and uncertain and therefore, it is considered as belonging to an inferior category of rural life having what is locally called a sub culture. The *char*-mainland dichotomy is a reflection of the popular view of culture in which the *char* is considered uninhabitable by the upper class *bhadraloks* (gentlemen)”. I found there is an open secret that power relations in the *char* lands are about pleasing the elites, mainly the landlords (mainly called *matbar*). This has always been a part of life for the poor. In every *char* I made good contact with the dominant *matbars* and they helped by making me familiar with the local people, but in the initial stages I felt that the *char* people in general were afraid of opening their minds and sometimes concealed facts. Talking with some people, I realised that this was mainly as they felt that truthful answers to my queries, if they got back to the *matbars*, might result in their eviction from the *char* or invite other unforeseen troubles.

I agree with Gardener (1995: 18) that no-one can deny the unequal power relationship between the researcher and the researched, even when the former is conscious about this relationship (Nahar, 2005: 6). Besides, as the literature suggests, moving between locals and their relations involves the complex, confusing, anxiety-provoking, and sometimes bizarre process of ‘identity management’ (see, Nagar, 1997; Robson, 1994), I then slightly changed my strategy. I decided to spend more time in every village and meet more people in their own places without any GO and NGOs official or even *matbar* present as elsewhere. Hammersley and

Atkinson (1983: 77-78) have argued that this avoids any impression that might pose an obstacle to access, while more positively creating an impression appropriate to the situation. I found that most of the people were gradually convinced and they did not consider me any more as a GO/NGO official or a very close associate of their *matbar*, though some were still suspicious³⁴. However, I ensured and respected the community people and respondents' privacy, secrecy and confidentiality during the fieldwork. Ethically, I positioned myself to perform this research in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the Geography Department of Durham University. This was an open statement that my research did not negatively intrude on my respondents from any ethical or moral point of view. I clearly informed them that as a researcher, I would not bring any change to their situation and would not be able to improve their livelihood condition to face the Monga. I took prior permission from the household heads, interviewees, and FGD participants.



Photograph 3.1: Processes to gaining access in the study villages and rapport building with the community.

³⁴ Reflecting on a similar problem, earlier, Chowdhury (1985: 104), while explaining his fieldwork experiences, claimed the difficulty of establishing rapport with some people is the “greatest problem in any field research in traditional Bangladesh”.

Finally, I would say that my key informants offered and helped me to enter into each place and introduce the community, and my positionality and ethical stand accelerated my access to the community and the households. Through these processes I was able to ensure a relationship of trust between the researched community and myself, with their very cordial and natural feelings, and in turn, allowed them to share their experiences, stories, and narratives enthusiastically. From the methodological point of view, my positionality influenced and increased the prospect of gathering reliable data that ultimately steered the constructive conclusion of my research.

3.3.6 Pilot Survey: ensuring field guide

Before capturing the data through the above mentioned methods, I conducted two pilot household participant observations and two in-depth interviews with household heads in a village to check the effectiveness of my procedures and the field guide that I planned beforehand. I found that the interview method worked better than the household observation. Though my plan was to observe each household for a week, I got the households' consent to do so only for two days. But after doing the first pilot household observation I realised that for better understanding of household chores and dynamics and their food provision strategies, I needed more days to observe. After consulting with the key informants and the selected households finally I did manage one additional day. I then carried out one more pilot household observation for three days, and found it suitable. Along with household observational duration, I did some necessary corrections of my interview guide and subsequently the FGD themes, as some of my ideas had changed and I got some new information.

3.4 Methods of producing data

3.4.1 Participant observation

The primary method of ethnography is participant observation (Patton, 1990). It provides a good opportunity to get detailed and real insights into actual situations including actions, conversations, and physical descriptions (Gittleson and Mookherji, 1997). Indicating the importance of participant observation, Hay (2010: 245) states that “the goal of participant observation is to develop understanding through being part of the spontaneity of everyday interactions”. In such a process, the researcher becomes an instrument that absorbs all sources of information (Neuman, 1994). Participant observations also act as ‘complementary evidence’ (Hay, 2010: 242) to determine whom to consider and how best to recruit informants for in-depth interviews and FGDs and also useful in improving and reviewing the interview guide and other research strategies.

I employed participant observations and focused on naturally occurring discourse in daily social interactions (Photograph 3.2). I did not fully participate in the community as a community member. Rather, as “the observer is very much a participant” (ibid: 243), and I observed both in the community and in selected households, prior to other data collection techniques, as well as simultaneously with other methods. In every village I stayed nearby in the community or within the settlement itself. The village community, particularly the union *Parishad* Member, and NGO officials helped a lot in arranging accommodation and providing other logistic supports. For example, in Dhamur *char*, as there was no suitable place of accommodation and it was very far from the mainland, two rooms in a primary school were set aside for me and my research assistants’ use for accommodation. The choice of staying within the villages actually permitted me to stay in a more neutral and open place from where I could actively be involved in data collection.

I spent the whole day, the evening and even part of the night with community people in different places in each village like at tea-stalls, in the local bazaar, sitting places near grocery shops and agriculture fields, where I talked with local people, children, and if possible with women who were willing to talk with me or my female research assistants. The demand of an unusual degree of rapport and confidence between me and the people was accommodated through such interaction. The overnight stays in the study villages gave an additional opportunity for informal discussion and closer observation. I attended many *addas*³⁵ during the evening and night time sessions as at that time people feel more relaxed to talk and share. The benefit of such informal discussions is that people can express their views without hesitation or fear because of the situational advantage (Khan, 2011). Sometimes I raised an issue in relation with my research aim intentionally but in a diplomatic way of natural conversation to obtain the facts, crucial information and alternatives on debating issues. Meeting with people at their *adda* and conducting informal discussion helped me to get authentic story/information about a number of issues: their everyday life, access and entitlement issues and constraints, common resources, food markets, relationships among classes and social complexities, communication, (mis)use of power of elites, and illegal (corruption) practices of government officials and elected representatives. All of these issues as a way of meaning from the community’s perspective facilitated me immensely to create coherent statements about the reality.

³⁵ In Bengali culture, informal discussion at leisure time is popularly known as *addah*. *Adda* is recognised as an everyday entertainment for rural communities, particularly for males, usually when they meet in the evening at tea-stalls or any convenient place. During my research, I found it to be a very effective way to develop relationships with the local community and be seen as a trustworthy person.



Photograph 3.2: Informal discussions with the researched community.

Household Observation

I carried out observations on a total of eight households (Table 3.3) across the study areas. Some of the questions this facilitated me to conduct in selected households were: how do households make use of their present resources? Who does what in their everyday production to consumption practices during the Monga and non-Monga period? What are the difficulties, perceived threats, and anxieties seen during the Monga? What are the core characteristics of their food insecurity and hunger situation? What are their everyday coping foods and the other strategies that households follow? Household observation helped me to improve my household semi-structured guide and gave me a crucial insight about the dichotomies and relationships between what people say and what people actually do (Agar, 1986).

Table 3.3: List of Households for Participant Observation.

Village	No. of interview	Household Head	Participant characteristics
Khadaimari	2	Male headed	Wage labour
		Female headed	Widow, maid, day labourer
Akaluganj Bazar	1	Male headed	Marginal deficit farmer
Aleker <i>Char</i>	1	Female headed	Divorcee, maid and part-time day labourer in NGO development
Dhamur <i>Char</i>	1	Male headed	Day wage labour/van puller/fishing (seasonal part-time agricultural labour)
	1	Female headed	Widowed, part-time agricultural work, NGO pumpkin cultivator
Dakhshin <i>Char</i>	2	Male headed	Small farmers
		Female headed	Divorcee, maid, sometimes begging, poultry rearing (mainly chicken and goats)

Each household I spent three days with, and each day was from early in the morning to night time but I did not stay overnight. My female research assistants also accompanied me. During the pilot survey and after several field visits I realised that it is not possible to stay overnight with the households as they had no spare room and home appliances to accommodate me or my female research assistants, and it was beyond their economic capacity to offer hospitality, even though they made cordial invitations. Instead, every day I came to each house with my female research assistants as early as possible in the morning, mainly before having their breakfast and returned to my accommodation when the respective household members and the head went to sleep. Thus I had the chance to observe the households for almost the whole day. I sat in the yard or a suitable place within the home where I could be an ‘objective observer’ in the process of ‘I see the case and I am seen’ (Deb, 2009: 21) and took notes and important photographs with their permission (Photograph 3.3). While doing this observation, sometimes all of the members left because they went outside for work. When this happened we did not stay and sometimes it did not seem appropriate to accompany people to their place of work. We waited outside until a household member came back and heard from them about their outside activities later on. Sometimes the household head or his wife invited me to take part in lunch and dinner and even offered some snacks like *muri* (puffed rice), biscuits, whatever they took. Household observation provided me with opportunities to develop an intuitive understanding of the details of access, rights and entitlement issues of the households, their living conditions, everyday livelihood activities, the division of labour, everyday food provisioning and food consumption and practices.



Photograph 3.3: Households' observation across the study villages.

3.4.2 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

Conversation through semi-structured in-depth interviews is the key to social research (Crang and Cook, 2007). It is an open-ended, discovery-oriented method (Punch, 1998) with a multiplicity of uses (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Semi-structured interviewing as a means of producing qualitative data is a flexible approach as it offers not only to use predetermined questions and topics, but also allows new topics to be pursued as the interview develops. I performed a total of 14 in-depth interviews with household heads across the study villages (Table 3.4). All interviews were semi-structured, open-ended, one-on-one, and were focused on eliciting participants' perspectives on the entire dimension of the Monga vulnerability, livelihood strategies, decision-making processes, and the use of social capital, as well as coping and other adaptation options that go with crises. My female assistants carried out all the interviews with women, except for two interviews where the respondent preferred to talk with me. However, I was present and if necessary I assisted them to facilitate the conversation process but at a preferred distance from the interviewees. In all the interview venues I used natural settings, mainly the respondents' preferred places, to keep them relaxed (Photograph 3.4).

Table 3.4: List of household heads for semi-structured interviews.

Village and Union	No. of interview	Household Head	Interviewees characteristics
Khadaimari	3	Male	Agriculture and other Wage Labourer
		Female	Day labour/Maid in a rich household in her village
		Female	Maid in a rich house/beggar
Akaluganj Bazar	3	Male	Sharecropper/ Agriculture Wage labourer
		Male	Agriculture wage labour/Fishing/Day labourer
		Female	Day labourer (agriculture works and earth moving)
Aleker Char	3	Male	Small farmer
		Male	Van puller/fishing/wage labourer (no fixed job)
		Female	Housewife/ Maid
Dhamur Char	1	Male	Marginal deficit farmer
	2	Male	Marginal deficit farmer
		Female	Part time agricultural labour/ Maid
Dakhshin Char	2	Male	Agricultural wage labourer/Part-time fishing
		Female	No fixed job (maid/beggar)

**Photograph 3.4:** In-depth interviews with household heads and GO/NOG officials.

During the interviews with the household heads, I maintained privacy and created a congenial atmosphere, but I was ‘listening with the third ear’ (Berg, 1989: 35 cited in Clock *et al.*, 2004: 158). As I stated earlier, all interviews were digitally recorded, therefore I did not have to make notes; instead I concentrated on understanding the respondent’s points of view and asking appropriate follow-up questions. I found that usually, the respondents began their

conversation with a little hesitation, but as the interview went ahead, they answered questions very naturally, and to a greater degree they were really excited to talk. I used simple prompts (for instances, “can you give me any examples?” “can you please tell me more about this” and, etc.) to encourage the respondent to elaborate on their ideas. Sometimes they tried to append some stories related to their answers, but it was also very common that sometimes their stories were not pertinent. At those moments, I strove to keep them on track by changing the topic, very carefully asking questions on general issues. I found that on some sensitive questions (for example, about the role of government officials or the Union Parishad’s member or chairman), some respondents requested me not to disclose their name, but they were nevertheless keen to give details. In this regard, I ensured them the anonymity and confidentiality of disclosing their opinions, feelings, attitudes, and reactions. However, in all the interview sessions I followed two basic steps to assess the validity, authenticity and truthfulness of the information: firstly, I asked the same questions at different points; and secondly asked the same questions to other respondents. I tried to solve any inconsistency I found, asking some additional questions related on that particular issue to get their opinion in this regard. Along with semi-structured interviews with household heads, I also had long, intensive discussions with one or two members of each household (particularly, with wife of male headed households, and elder son or daughter of female headed households), which gave me greater insight into the individual indirect subjective views of the household dynamics.

I also conducted 14 in-depth interviews (Table 3.5) with personnel from community GOs and NGOs (Photograph 3.4). My purpose behind these interviews was to obtain effective detailed information and their critical views on research issues and also to discover the gap between the existing policy and programmes and the grounded realities, ultimately the institutional complexity. All the interviews were at their offices either locally or in Dhaka at their convenience. Visiting their offices also give me additional benefit to observe their ongoing activities, publications (for example, collecting posters and unpublished documents) and to carry out informal discussions with other officials who were engaged in different programmes designed for Monga eradication, poverty reduction and livelihood enhancement e.g. the *Char* livelihoods programmes (CLP) of DFID. However, on many occasions, while conducting these interviews, I also cross-checked gathered information and data to confirm their authenticity.

The contents of in-depth interviews with the household heads (see, Annex II) and GO-NGO personnel (see, Annex III) were helpful for a greater understanding of the vast issues regarding the vulnerabilities to the Monga and chronic food insecurity, households’ interlocking strategies to cope with the Monga, unfolding choices, and different dimensions of GO/NGOs policy and programme information that has been designed to eradicate the Monga and improve

the food security situation. However, it is noteworthy to say that it was not possible to formulate a strict guide for every interview, though I had a number of predetermined topics and questions. In this sense, I was not rigid in them; rather, I maintained flexibility and was diplomatic in the way of contacting respondents and negotiating ‘research deals’ (ibid: 102) by introducing new questions and topics if required. Every interview demanded its own preparation. I did not set a time frame for interview length; a few interviews lasted more than an hour and others took even longer.

Table 3.5: List of GO, NGOs and other key informants for in-depth interviews.

Types of Organisation		Affiliations
GO	Local Administration level	The Relief and Rehabilitation officer, Nilphamari
		Upazila Agriculture Officer (UAO), Rowmari Upazila, Kurigram
		Upazila Food officer (UFO), Sundorganj Upazial, Gaibandha
		Upazila Agriculture officer (UAO) Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), Gangachara Upazial, Rangpur
		Upazila Agriculture officer (UAO), Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), Kaliganj Upazila, Lalmonirhat
	National Level	Chairman, Bangladesh NGO Foundation, The Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Economist
NGO	Local and Regional Level (Working with Donor Agency)	Executive Director, Udayankur Sheba Sangstha (USS) - A local NGO, Nilphamari
		Executive Director, Akota- A local NGO, <i>Char</i> Livelihoods Project (CLP), DFID, Sundarganj, Gaibandha
Donor funded Project	Area: Northern Region	Head of NGO Partner of the Food security and Community Food Bank Project, Rowmari, Kurigram, Funded by DelPHI, UK.
		Head of Gaibandha Food Security Project for Ultra Poor Women, An European Union Funded Project, Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS), Gaibandha
Community Organisation	Local Community based	Chairman of Community <i>Dhan</i> bank 1, Laxmichap Union, Nilphamari
Research Institute	Regional Level (attached with NGO)	Research Coordinator, North Bangle Institute (NBI), RDRS, Rangpur
International Organisation		Consultant, USAID (United States Agency for International Development) Seed Project, International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Dhaka, Bangladesh
Philanthropic, Researcher		Founder of the Concept of Community <i>Dhan</i> Bank for Monga eradication, Laxmichap, Nilphamari, Former Professor of Public University

3.4.3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs are a fast, economical, and efficient method for gathering reliable and valid qualitative data from multiple participants (Krueger and Casey, 2000) ‘focused around a particular set of issues’ (Wilkinson, 2004: 177), and they are thereby a socially oriented method (Krueger and Casey, 2000). FGDs can provide insights into how people construct their world views through interactions with others (Pratt, 2002). Hay (2010: 157) states that ‘it is a highly effective vehicle for exploring the nuances and complexities associated with people-place relationships’. Belonging to a group increases the participants’ sense of cohesiveness and it feels safe to share information (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996) thus yielding much important data (Morgan, 1997). FGDs offer a setting where the participants discuss the problems as well as provide possible solutions (Duggleby, 2005).

I conducted a total of 8 FGDs across the study area (Table 3.6). Each FGD session comprised a small group, five to eight participants, so that everyone had the opportunity to express their opinion. I did not use a ‘mixed gender group’ (see, Goss and Leinbach, 1996); rather, I compiled each group of the same gender while ‘ensuring homogeneity within the group and heterogeneity between them’ (Bedford and Burgess, 2002: 124), and conducted FGDs with males and females separately (Photograph 3.5). This enabled the female group to share their opinions more freely and I tried to include people in each group who were not too familiar with one another (e.g. family member or friends).

Table 3.6: List of the FGD sessions and participants characteristics.

Village	No. of FGD	Focus Group	Participant characteristics	No. of Participant
Khadaimari	2	Men	Middle aged wage labour	8
		Women	Housewife	6
		Women	Members of Community <i>Dhan</i> Bank	8
Akaluganj Bazar	2	Adolescent girls	School going and non-school going	7
		Men	Aged people	6
Aleker Char	2	Women	Female-headed household heads (widowed, divorced, disabled)	7
		Men	Seed sellers, marginal and smaller farmers	8
Dhamur Char	1	Men	Seed sellers, marginal and smaller farmers	8
Dakhshin Char	1	Women	Housewives, widowed, divorced	7



Photograph 3.5: Two FGD sessions with male and female groups.

For conducting FGDs, I chose places that were neutral, free from distractions, easily accessible, and also comfortable to my participants. I provided them some refreshments at the beginning of the session to help them relax (Hay, 2010) and be familiar with the environment. As Stewart *et al.* (2007) suggests, for each group, I played role as moderator and one of my research assistants acted as assistant moderators (male research assistant for FGD with male and female was for FGDs with female). I led the discussion and kept the conversation flowing. To make each session lively and interactive as well as to gather in-depth information I used several techniques, such as asking questions, telling stories, showing photographs, interpretation of different themes, etc. on different related issues. All of the conversions were recorded. My research assistants took comprehensive notes, operated the voice recorders, handled the conditions and logistics, responded to unexpected interruptions and kept track of time. At the end of each FGD session my research assistants and I discussed the findings and drew conclusions about the major findings of that session.

Through the FGDs I captured data on diverse issues, like how the Monga evolved, physical and socio-political factors that shaped the Monga, livelihood portfolios and diversification in this region, agriculture and its changing relation with the Monga, production, markets and prices, overall poverty and non-farm development, constraints to access and control over assets, gender, the role of social networks, as well as the role of GOs and NGOs in Monga eradication, and so on (see, Annex IV for FGD guide).

3.4.4 Other sources of qualitative data

Apart from the above-mentioned ethnographic methods, I attended a round-table discussion (RTD), mainly an expert sharing meeting on the draft evaluation report on ‘Monga *Mokabelay* Community *Dhan* Bank Project’ (Community *Dhan* Bank Project for the Monga eradication), held on 27 November 2011 in Dhaka at the office of Bangladesh Freedom Foundation

(Photograph 3.6) – a National NGO and one of the donors to the Community *Dhan* Bank in Nilphamari District. Representing different national NGOs and donor agencies, beneficiaries of the *Dhan* bank, researchers and academics from Dhaka and Jahangirnagar University were present in this RTD. The draft report on *Community Dhan Bank Project to eradicate Monga in Laxmichap union, Nilphamari* was presented to the audience for open discussion.

I also attended two community level beneficiary meetings (Photograph 3.6) of two organisations that were working on food security and the Monga in the Rangpur region. One was a target group meeting of the Food Security and Community Food Bank Project under the finance of Development Partner of Higher Education (DelpHE), UK carried out by the Unnoyan Uddog Bangladesh – a national NGO, Dept. of Geography and Environment, Jahangirnagar University, and Dept. of Geography, University of Hull, UK, held on 16 October, 2011 in Rowmari, Kurigram. The other was a weekly meeting of the beneficiaries of the CLP of DFID carried out by the AKOTA, a local NGO of Gaibandha District, held on 28 January, 2012 in Sundarganj, Gaibandha. Both were general meetings of the target groups where they share their ongoing activities with the key project officials as well as with the other beneficiaries. Attending these meetings helped me to be familiar with the organisational activities, community needs in the face of the Monga, some weaknesses, opportunities, and how their activities can be enhanced in future considering the existing barriers.



Photograph 3.6: A RTD on the evaluation of the role of Community *Dhan* Bank in Monga eradication (Top left); Beneficiary meetings of Community *Dhan* bank (bottom left; source: courtesy by Professor Shamsuddin); a target group monthly meeting of the Food Security through community food Bank Project in Rowmari (Top right); mini-discussion meeting with partner actors of the GFSUPW project (Bottom right).

I also arranged an informal mini discussion meeting with the officials of three partner NGOs of the Gaibandha Food Security Project for Ultra-poor Women (GFSUPW) project on 1 March, 2012 at its project office in Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS), Gaibandha (Photograph 3.6). Some details of the project are given in Chapter eight. The representatives present in this meeting were from RDRS, Gram Unnayan Kendro (GUK) and the Leprosy Mission Bangladesh. The aim of this mini RTD was twofold: first to know the expert comments on the existing features of their current project initiative, its success and hindrances along with other parallel initiatives taken by the other NGOs and donor agencies; and the second one was to share some of my experiences that I had gathered from the field. Sharing my experiences through the mini discussion increased my data reliability.

3.5 Data analysis

Qualitative research involves almost continuous and certainly progressive data analysis from the very beginning of data collection (Ely *et al.*, 1991) to construct theories and to offer further study or practice (Eisner, 1991; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). There are a number of approaches, multiple perspectives and practices that are used to analyse data in qualitative research (Green and Thorogood, 2004). But Patton (2002: 432) argues that “qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Direction can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when—and if—arrived at”. Thus, essentially, qualitative data analysis is a process best ‘learnt by doing’ (Froggatt, 2001, cited in Casterle *et al.*, 2012: 360).

Whatever the route by which the data have been constructed (Cloke *et al.*, 2004), Miles and Huberman (1984: 21) suggest that data analysis begins with ‘data reduction’, that is the processes of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming ... ‘raw data’. In doing so, I transcribed verbatim all recorded data including the non-verbal signals (Casterle *et al.*, 2012). I also listened to the recordings several times to become “sensorially engaged” with my respondents’ experiences (Nichter 2008: 178). Since I used solely Bengali in the field, all the transcripts were then translated into English. I carefully read the transcripts several times to keep the respondents’ words as close as possible to the analysis and to gain an appreciation of the recordings as a whole text. My research diaries and field notes also helped me to enrich my documentation and acted as the basis of my data analysis. Here, it is noteworthy to mention that I carried out the actual data analysis with pen and paper.³⁶

³⁶ There are number of computer software packages available to analyse qualitative data, for example, AQUAD6, ATLAS/ti5, HyperRESEARCHCH2.6, MaxQDA2, NVivo, and so on (Hay, 2010). Among them the most prominent one that is extensively used at Durham University is NVIVO. I learned to use this software as a part of my doctoral training. But later I found that, while the short training gave the basic concepts and practising ability, I could not reach a sufficient level of skill for handling a large amount of data. Then I decided to use simply a pen

My first analytical tool was ethnographic interpretation of the data that concentrates on the textual construction of reality. I interpreted and explained some accounts of participant observations both at community and household level, in-depth interviews as well as FGDs with this approach to focus on insights about daily food provisioning, hunger characteristics, and coping strategies of the Monga-affected households in order to feel what it was like for the people in that situation (Sanday, 1983). In so doing, at first I read the ethnographic data to identify common themes and relations, which were then coded to construct key themes, make sequential arguments and enable illustrative analysis. It became a concern to reconstruct the overall worldview – possessed by an identifiable grouping occupying a definite place in the world (Cloke *et al.*, 2004:318). Along with text, I used visual forms of ethnographic representation, mainly photographs that I captured during the fieldwork to record for posterity the ways-of-life of the households and especially their situational experiences. It also provided an unimpeachable witness and source of highly reliable data.

One of the seamless approaches to the ethnographic analysis of data is narratives. In narrative analysis, form and content can be studied together, and a concern with narrative can illuminate how informants use language to convey particular meanings and experiences (Punch, 1998). Using narrative analysis I phrased a ‘thick description’ (Cloke *et al.*, 2004; Geertz, 1973) of the stories that my respondents employed. These descriptions provided me the centre of experiences, intentions, understandings and motivations that surround those experiences (Atkinson, 1998; Bryman, 2004) of the Monga vulnerable poor. I always followed reflexivity concerning the ways in which narratives are told in their social settings. As kindly permitted by my respondents, I cited quotes properly with their name, relating to their perceptions on certain issues, except in some cases where I needed to maintain anonymity and privacy. I also included brief paraphrasing that stays close to the data, more abstract renderings of the data, or comments on the narrative structure or interactional features of the recorded events (Sandelowski, 1995 cited in Casterle *et al.*, 2012: 365). The use of narratives belongs mainly to three central aspects of my research: it performs systemic and/or purposive analysis (Atkinson and Delmont, 2006); it interprets the ‘in place’ experiences of different individuals and groups and how they understand and attach meaning to situated experiences (Wiles *et al.*, 2005); and it is directly linked with ethnographic methods.

I adopted the grounded theory approach extensively to develop an explanation from the perspectives of the grounded reality about the geographies of the Monga vulnerability to the everyday life of the affected poor. It also helped me to identify and explain the most significant

and paper, the traditional way of analysing qualitative data but also very effective even nowadays in the digital world.

concepts and key aspects, i.e. the contexts and problems existing in the diverse social and institutional environments in northwest Bangladesh by which the Monga is shaped and reshaped. It is well established that grounded theory is best defined as a research strategy (Punch, 1998), which offers a detailed and empirically rich interpretation of social situations under investigation (Cloke *et al.*, 2004) and then generates theory from this data. I analysed some interview and focus group data through this approach based on the ‘codes’ and ‘constant comparison’ techniques (see, Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Necombe and Conard, 1981) that correspond closely to the data for a diversity of themes. I carried out coding up of my textual evidence, and in this context, I used both *emic* (households perceptions and voices on infinite complexities) and *etic* (my impartial views of facts and findings) codes³⁷ between and within different groups, at a variety of levels. For making constant comparison, I compared incident with incident, incident with subjects’ accounts, and the later with other subjects’ accounts (Tilbury and Welford, 1996: 57). I thus distinguished between similarities and differences among incidents and attempted to clarify these by establishing core variables considering the aim and objectives of the research. These constant ‘forward–backward movements’ (Swanson-Kauffman and Schonwarld, 1988) facilitated the identification of common themes and concepts. This increased the validity of the data and strengthened the categories emerging from the findings (Tilbury and Welford, 1996). The vulnerable people’s perceptions concerning the Monga and its social-economic and political dimensions fit into a grounded theory approach in focusing on the realities of a situation.

Along with the above analytical tools, I also used ‘content analysis’ for my transcribed field data, secondary documents, reports, policy papers, media reports and so on to analyse these textual documents critically and to relate with the collected data through fieldwork. It also helped me to reduce the large amount of textual data through identifying potential concepts and simultaneously, to retest existing data in a new context, depending on the aim of the study. I used individual themes as the coding unit. When reading the data I asked myself: who is telling?; where is this happening?; when did it happen?; what is happening?; and why? in order to identify themes and patterns. I spent sufficient time to patiently develop different categories of knowledge and abstraction. I followed a mostly inductive approach in this regards. After coding the entire data set I rechecked all my coding, eventually for reducing down to the main categories and to check in respect of their reliability. Finally to present the reconstructions of meaning derived from the data, I included the procedures of exploring the properties and

³⁷ Though it is argued that the truly grounded theorists should use only *emic* codes as a means of keeping coding as close as possible to the sense and spirit of the respondents worldview, in practice, however, Cloke *et al.* (2004) argue that it is probably best to see coding as a constant movement between the concepts of the researcher and the interviewees.

dimensions of categories, identifying relationships between categories, and uncovering different patterns against the full range of data.

3.6 Problems and limitations

A successful fieldwork is not beyond its limitations. During the entire fieldwork I faced several problems with a diversity of situations. Moreover, the approach, strategies and methods that I used have their own limitations.

I did not select my study villages prior going to Bangladesh, and I took almost one month to make a decision on selection. As the villages are located in different districts and under different local settings, for that reason I needed an extended period to build a relationship and gain the trust of the community that reduced my data collecting period to some degree. As my fieldwork was conducted over one field visit session, the disadvantage being that I did not examine whether the overall Monga situation and the condition of the households who were getting some benefits from the GO and NGOs have been changing year on year. Besides, due to time limitations I did not undertake an in-depth ethnographic study, as I did not take part in the villages as a community member as it needs a considerable length of time to be a full participant.

I used informal discussions with the villagers across age, gender, and occupations. There were limitations of informal discussion in the sense that I usually did not get an opportunity to write or record any notes on the discussion. I had to remember all the critical issues and points that were discussed to maintain the naturalistic atmosphere. Though I maintained a diary to recapitulate the critical and main points after returning to my living place as immediately as possible, sometimes I forgot some points that might have been useful for my research.

Sometimes problems came up in different ways. Though I tried to work according to schedule, often this was very difficult due to unavoidable circumstances. There were some cases I found that when I went to take the interview with household head, at that time he or she was away from home. Their family members told me to come at another time and I did this. In one case, my experience was different. One day while an interview was going on with an informant at Akaluganj Bazar of Laxmichap union, suddenly he mentioned that he felt uncomfortable to speak right now. I just stopped. I asked him whether he was feeling ill or whether there was another reason. But he replied that he wasn't interested to talk then and that I had better come the next day. When I went to his household the next day according to his given time he was not at home. I stayed there two hours but he didn't return. Then I visited three times but I couldn't get in touch. Then I cancelled him as a respondent and tried to find a new one.

Changes to the schedule of interviews with officials of both GO and NGOs were also common. With one individual it was only after I had kept four appointments that I was able to conduct a full interview. This kind of experience was not uncommon and it was frequently only after several visits, including an introductory visit and hand-delivered letter explaining my institutional affiliation or my official visiting card, the objective of the research, and assuring full confidentiality, that the interview took place.

Household observation and interviewing the womenfolk were difficult tasks. Unknown persons are not welcome at first contact, but given a little time and friendly persuasion about the innocuousness of the reasons for interviewing them, they begin to open up, except in a few cases. Whenever I had the opportunity to talk to them, my general impression was that they were friendly and honest in their statements compared to the males. On the other hand, male members were not forthcoming when talking about their relationship within the family. As I took the opportunity to discuss their problems with the women in their homes, I felt the menfolk wondering how was it that their women had so much to say about their homes and families to a stranger. My conversations with the womenfolk gave them scope to express their sufferings, but still I felt there was a barrier which they could not overcome. The interview sessions eventually led me to believe that the village society was very crudely a 'man only' domain.

Though semi-structured questionnaires permitted more flexible answers and scope for the interviewees to develop their own accounts of their experiences in their own words, nevertheless I found sometimes they were not fully responsive in some issues, and there was a risk of bias in their answers. I found that some questions, particularly regarding the role of GO and NGOs and their interventions were not easily responded to by the interviewees and they had some bias due to their alignment with a political party. If the respondents supported the government party then their answers were in favour of the government's 'positive' actions. But if they belonged to the opposition, their responses were negative, with insulting words. To avoid some probable conflict, my first intention at that time was to hear their voices, but gradually to motivate them by re-stating my identity and the purpose of my research. I found that some were convinced to tell the real situation, not from their political point of view; some re-responded but still had some influences. The main drawback in the case of interviews by semi-structured format with the organisational personnel was that they had tendencies to control the conversation and show more 'influential attitude' over me when I needed clarification on some issues.

Frequent political instability and unexpected uncertainty in the form of transport strikes, *hartal* (political unrest) etc. in the country during my field work created enormous problems not only to maintain scheduled work but also put a great strain on the limited overall budget.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the overall research approach including an explanation of how methodological choices were made within the ‘reality’ of the field in relation to the relevant academic literature. Considering the gaps in the qualitative research in food security in Bangladesh, I consider my fieldwork as a unique experience, both academically and personally. Following the process of working ‘from below,’ especially from the socio-economically marginalised social actors’ (Long, 1989: 247) in northwest Bangladesh, my fieldwork developed a deep conviction that the detailed, immersive, inductive methodology enabled me to understand Monga vulnerability like an ‘insider’ (Herbert, 2000). Despite the above-mentioned limitations, I believe that the interpretation of household perceptions about Monga vulnerability are reasonably robust, because methodologically I applied different techniques to minimize those issues, thereby enriching the field data. Thus, the collected data were not only ‘realities extracted from the field’ but also are the ‘intersubjective truths’ negotiated out of the warmth and friction of an unfolding, iterative process (Parr, 2001). It also helped me to have high regard and respect to the people suffering from poverty and chronic food insecurity. On the other hand, my fieldwork experience was an opportunity to flesh out existing theories in a way that provided some greater capacity to understand the complex nature of the Monga vulnerability. In fact, the field experiences led me to the conclusion that theories are grounded in practice and the synchronized presentation of the theoretical aspect with the empirical material of households’ views upon which this thesis is based. Therefore, the present research is essentially an ethnographic quest of food in/security in a geographical framework. Chapters four to eight will set out the results that emerged from the research strategies and methods presented above.

Chapter Four

Politics of Space:

The Facets of Vulnerability to Food Insecurity

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of the factors that generate vulnerability to food insecurity at household level in northwest region. Most recently, when the media broadcast the fearful situation of the ‘Monga’ region across the nation, it flashed stark images of the gulf between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in this region and demonstrated the unspeakable miseries of the poor, whose tenuous survival strategies had broken down because of an array of interlinked factors. Zug (2006) pointed out that the cause of the 1974 famine can be seen as a very severe Monga and it has been argued that the Greater Rangpur was the worst affected region (Elahi and Ara, 2008: 26). Rahman (2007) argues as Monga-prone areas, there is a need for greater understanding and clarity about the risks and vulnerability faced by the poor as well as the long term livelihood constraints in which they are operated. Thus, the questions remain: why do the poor households of this region today continue to subsist in poverty, suffering daily the pangs of hunger and living under the threat of food insecurity despite this region being said to be in food surplus? What are the roots of this crippling poverty and vulnerability, and what factors are responsible for its perpetuation? However, it is frequently argued that the core of this malaise is the widespread poverty which is not only economic but also characterised by physical, social and political manifestations as well. Elsewhere, Maiga (2010) suggested that the vulnerability context in less-favoured areas refers to the biophysical environment (ecological vulnerability) and the societal context (societal vulnerability). As vulnerability has internal and external dimension (see, section 2.3), it is thus understood that both factors are inseparable for understanding the processes by which contemporary northwest region arrived at such a significant chronic and also seasonal hunger situation like the Monga. Vulnerability in this conceptualisation also tends to be place-based, through an analysis of causal agents and impacts occurring in a contained and contiguous geographic space (Eakin, 2009). This also involves underpinning people’s daily interactions with risk and the ability to bounce back differs from the ability to endure hardship (i.e. resilience). Sen, in this context, saw vulnerability as about risks and rights through the inequalities in the development process (Sen, 2002) with regard to the ways in which poor experience marginalisation and discrimination. Drawing on Sen’s entailment, political

economy and political ecology, and largely based on empirical data, this chapter begins by examining the underlying dynamics of physical, socio-economic and political as well as cultural factors, which have constituted the vulnerability to food security of the poor households in this region over time. It also looks at the historical roots that are the basis of present day food insecurity.

4.2 Ecological vulnerability

4.2.1 Agro-ecological constraints

Like in other agriculturally-based societies, food security, livelihoods, and household vulnerability are closely intertwined with adverse environmental phenomena and disasters. Zug (2006) pointed out that the occurrence and severity of seasonal hunger in this region and its impact within upazilas and even within single unions is not identical because of ecological and social variability. In the household interviews and FGDs issues of physical constraints were raised, particularly the seasonality of growing agricultural crops due to soil conditions, climatic variability, the consequence of the disasters like floods, drought and river bank erosion, and cold spells, occurring frequently.

Agro-ecologically the northwest part is located in the younger part of the Teesta alluvial fan, occupying a complex landscape of sandy ridges and almost-level land (Brammer, 1996:62). The soil of the area is mostly sandy and loamy and without the ability to hold sufficient water that makes it difficult for multi-crop farming and, hence the farmers face difficulties (CDMP, 2009). As mentioned earlier (Chapter 1), although the other parts of the country can grow crops year-round, allowing three to four crops in a year, the northwest region is generally limited mostly to two, or recently to some extent, three crops in a year. Farmers of the *char* lands face a serious problem as the soils of the *chars* are mainly coarse sand and hence, they become very dry.

“The soil of the *chars* of this district is very sandy and is not as good as *chars* elsewhere in Bangladesh. The sandy soils have a very low water carrying capacity and dry out very fast, and for this reason, much *char* land in this district is only single cropped. Agriculture is for these reasons less profitable and more risky.”

(Upazila Agriculture Officer of Kaliganj, Lalmonirhat, interviewed on 3 January, 2012)

Another problem faced by the farmers of the study area is soil acidity. “While most crops grow best in neutral soils (pH 7.0), the soils around Rangpur and other surrounding northern districts are highly acidic (pH <5.5) with low calcium and magnesium levels” (The UAO of Gangachara, Rangpur, interviewed on 12 February, 2012). Many small to big farmers are now

using a variety of chemical fertilizers to increase productivity in the short term, although experts said³⁸ that this will decrease soil fertility in the long run to the extent that it may not recover. Though the cropping intensity is much higher in the main Monga-prone areas (Zug, 2006), inadequate pre-monsoon showers, a delay in the onset of the rainy seasons, or an early departure of the monsoon can all create dry conditions and so decrease crop yields. Besides, during the winter season, the Teesta and all of the other major rivers dry up (Photograph 4.1) and there is almost no rainfall³⁹; the climate is dry, soil moisture is reduced and the ground aquifer level in the sandy soils drops drastically, sometimes below 8.9 to 18.56 metres in some areas (CDMP, 2009), causing a serious threat to the environment and irrigation in this region. Not only that, temporary arid conditions are evident in some areas particularly Rangpur and Nilphamari districts due to hydrological droughts and the extensive utilization of groundwater in these areas (Huq *et al.*, 2000).



Photograph 4.1: The dry condition of the Teesta River. For going to the mainland, *char* people have to cross the river on foot instead of boat during the winter season.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

³⁸ In a workshop held in Rajshahi March 10, 2012 on “Dolochun (Lime) Increases Crop Production in Acid Soils of Bangladesh: Experiences from Rangpur, Rajshahi and Sylhet Division” organized by Wheat Research Centre (WRC) under Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute (BARI), the experts there also expressed opinions to the effect that “the soil productivity has gradually been declining as the soil has become strongly acidic following repeated crop cultivation through indiscriminate using of chemical fertilizers and pesticides round the year” (*The Financial Express*, 2012).

³⁹ Usually the rainfall in the northern parts is comparatively less than in the other regions of the country. From a 50 year (1958-2007) analysis of mean annual rainfall of the Rangpur weather station, Moniruzzaman and Alam (2011) showed that Rangpur experienced less annual rainfall (2111mm) compared to the national average (2403 mm) over that period. There is speculation that there may, as a result, have been changes in the overall climatic pattern, with this region now experiencing extreme cold in winter and hot weather in summer (Akram, 2008).

“I have been cultivating tobacco for the last three years to earn a profit as it is becoming more popular to the marginal farmer like me. But it requires continuous water. I usually use the traditional techniques for irrigation [photograph 4.2] as I don’t have the financial capacity to use pump irrigation and it is cost-effective. This year I am frustrated. I am not getting much water through the way I have irrigated my land before. If I can’t input sufficient water, and it will affect my crop yield.”

(Jaynal Bapari, 59 years, marginal farmer, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 23 February, 2012)



Photograph 4.2: Traditional irrigation in the Tobacco field during dry season.
Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

The UAO of Gangachara (interviewed, February, 2012) mentioned that most of the shallow pumps of this region go below the suction lift capacity having severe implications for terrestrial vegetative cover and aggregated agricultural yields. Hence poor farmers face difficulty in getting water into their seedbeds and fields. It is important to mention here that in the northwest region irrigation is almost entirely dependent on groundwater due to the scarcity of surface water caused by failure of the main irrigation project, the Teesta Barrage Project.⁴⁰ This project has been unable to supply water for irrigation as per its target due to the interruption of the water flow in winter due to a barrage constructed by India on its side of the boundary at Gazoldoba. As a result, it irrigates only 44,000 ha. During the rainy season there is a sudden release of excess water through the Gazoldoba Barrage causing floods and riverbank

⁴⁰ Historically a mega plan was undertaken to irrigate in 1,335,000 ha in greater Rangpur, Dinajpur and Bogra districts under this project in 1979. In December, 1979, construction of the Teesta barrage was started in Dalia of Nilphamari district. Later it was shifted to Doani at Kaliganj Upazila of Lalmonirhat district, omitting the 20 megawatt water-based electricity plant. The irrigation project was then divided into two parts. The first phase of 99,226 ha was to serve five thanas of Nilphamari, four thanas of Rangpur and three thanas of Dinajpur District. Construction of an irrigation canal system started in 1984-85. Irrigation started initially in 1993 and the first phase of the project work was completed in 1998. Kharip-1 was to be for irrigation in dry season and Kharip-2 was for irrigation in case of inadequate rainy seasons (Mbugua, 2011). The second phase of irrigation started in 2006 in Joypurhat district.

erosion. But the governmental efforts have not been adequate and no fixed programmes are currently dealing with this crisis.

“Failure of government policy to establish the right of fifty-fifty share of the Teesta river water with India is one of the causes of flood and drought of this region. Any future unilateral share of water may make this region more vulnerable to those disasters from which the ultimate results are extreme ecological degradation and food insecurity.”

(Mr. Alauddin Ali, the executive director of Udayankur Seba Sangstha, a local NGO of Niphamari District, interviewed on 25 February, 2011)

Marginal and poor farmers in the region are suffering year after year for a lack of adequate facilities provided by the government. The effort they are putting in to increase their agricultural production is at their own expense. As the irrigation market is yet expensive, marginal and poor farmers are not able to afford irrigation, which creates a mixed challenge for them of both physical and socio-economic factors. However, farmers reported they do not pay by volume for irrigation water; rather, they pay for pumping cost if any and for labour charges. Marginal and poor farmers who produce irrigated *Boro* rice have to input more irrigation than the other farmers. But the problem that as point out is that during the dry season the price of diesel goes up, which is a burden for them if they are to provide the required amount of water to the field. Moreover, in mainland villages due to frequent load shedding, irrigation activities cannot be done properly. Also due to low voltages, the irrigation machinery is out of order for almost two-thirds of the time. Farmers reported that they have been adversely affected by the rising cost of power input, thereby decreasing their profits and the results have meant that not many have been able to shed their marginal identity.

Local people reported that during the dry season, due to the sandy soils, water in most of the region's ponds evaporates and they become totally useless (Photograph 4.3). Unlike other regions of the country, commercial pond fish culture is carried out only to a limited extent. Akram (2008) mentioned that there is a fish protein deficiency in much of this region. Sometimes poor households can't eat fish even for one to two months at a time as fish prices increase to unexpected high levels due to scarcity caused by the dried up water bodies and even the Teesta river. Participants of different FGD sessions reported that women in particular face insecurity due to the loss of bio-diversity as they are dependent on natural resources for food, fodder, fuel wood and medicinal use. Access to and control over common natural resources thus is restricted drastically and a shorter form of *Monga* is created in the affected areas.



Photograph 4.3: The dried condition of the pond becomes unproductive during the dry season.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

4.2.2 Continuous exposure to disasters

Like in other regions of Bangladesh, continuous exposure to natural disasters and their severe impacts breaks down the livelihoods of the northwest poor and they fall into a transitory to chronic poverty situation. Participants of all the FGD sessions reported that an increased frequency of floods is experienced now as compared to earlier years, warm days are prolonged in summer, there is an increased frequency of storms, and the coldness of the winter is becoming more severe. Except for Akaluganj Bazar village of Nilphamari Sadar Upazila, all of the villages at my research sites are extremely flood-prone⁴¹. Generally, flooding is extended for 4 months, occurring in the Bengali calendar at *Ashar* (June-July), *Srabon* (July-August), *Vadro* (August-September), and *Ashwin* (September-October). Most of the elderly people I spoke to observed that the frequency of mid-scale floods has increased conspicuously in the last two decades and the time of flooding has shifted; it may come early or late, or even twice a year. Along with normal flooding in the monsoon season, flash floods also have become a common phenomenon in these areas, which occur after continuous and heavy rainfall both in the region and in the upper catchment in India. Participants in a FGD session at Rowmari reported that the problem of flooding is sometimes highly localized. The areas affected are mostly located within a few kilometres radius on both sides of rivers and canals. But most of the *Chars* are submerged in normal flooding. The floods determine and limit agricultural activities and the risk of damage to crops is comparably higher. Since most of the land in these areas is deep flooded, many fields are kept fallow during the *Aman* season or sown with the traditional low yielding deep water *Aman* crop. Single cropped *Boro* rice is the main cropping pattern on normally flooded land, mostly in the *char* areas.

⁴¹ The chronology of major floods in this region after independence shows that 1974, 1988, 1998 and 2007 were the most devastating (Elahi and Ara, 2008). It is well known that the Bangladesh famine of 1974 was associated with floods that came during June to September of that year from an inflated Brahmaputra river.

“I have experienced floods in almost every year but the flood of 2007 was very different to other years. That year flood has occurred two times and thwarted my efforts at recovery. The first flood damaged my standing crops, seedlings, and poultry. Immediately after the first flood, I tried to offset my loss by transplanting seedlings of *Aman* rice. But unfortunately, the second flood submerged the young seedlings for more than a week, which they could not survive. Besides the financial constraints, it was too late in the season to recover the loss again through replanting. Only a few farmers tried to transplant *Aman* rice even though most of them believed that the yield would be extremely low. They were planting on the hope that the plants could be used to feed the cattle, as fodder was also scarce”.

(Amzad Miah, 54 years, farmer, Aleker *char*, Sundorganj, interviewed on 27 December, 2012)

So, there is a substantial loss of income for households who go for the transplanted *Aman* crop. There is also a high vulnerability for the potentially affected groups of marginal farmers and day-labourers, whose yields and employment opportunities decrease with crop losses (Zug, 2006). The *char* dwellers are especially vulnerable because, even if they can stay at home, they suffer from acute shortages of drinking water and problems of sanitation. Moreover, *char* people experience more negative economic outcomes if they have to sell their most valuable milk-producing cow or their cattle at distressed lower prices due to the problem of keeping them in a safe place and lack of fodder.

“The recent flood washed away my haystack and damaged grass fields in the area. We always graze our cows on the grass fields in the village as we cannot purchase hay from the local markets at their high prices. We could not collect straw for our cattle during the harvest season due to incessant rain that flooded the fields. One *maund* (local weight measuring unit for goods; 1 *maund* = 37.3242kg) of hay is sold for Tk 350 to Tk 400 in local markets during the flood whereas it is sold for Tk 120 to 150 in normal times. Failing to buy pricey fodder, many farmers sell their cattle at throwaway prices. I was forced to sell my milk cows at a low price in the last flood due to the lack of space to keep them and manage their fodder. That cow was my main income source during the Monga season.”

(Mozibor Rahman, 50 years, agricultural day labour, Sundorganj, participant of FGD, 5 January, 2012)

As female-headed households have limited personal assets and opportunities to find outside work, they may be forced to borrow money, or sell or mortgage their assets as ways to survive during and after the flood period. FGD participants of all sessions commented on temporary situations of food unavailability in local markets, when prices of all basic foodstuffs double or treble and go beyond the purchasing power of the poor just at the time when their income has dropped drastically. These recurrent floods, coupled with livelihood vulnerability, create the temporary phenomenon of the Monga. Both food and fuel crises force the poor into starvation. Most discrimination is seen against females in food consumption within households. Indeed,

due to cumulative cycles of the flood impacts in this area within a brief period of time the healing process is threatened, which makes development efforts very difficult.

Unlike other parts of the country, the northwest region is relatively vulnerable to drought, mostly in the pre-monsoon and post-monsoon periods that vary from year to year, both in terms of intensity and duration (Moniruzzaman and Alam, 2011: 76). During the last 50 years, this region has suffered from a number of droughts, for instance, one of the most severe of the twentieth century, which started in October 1994 and ended in July 1995 with the onset of the monsoon rains (Das, 2000: 22). The significance of drought can be exemplified by the shortfall of rice production of 3.5 million tons in the 1990s (Banglapedia, 2006). Participants in the FGD in Akaluganj Bazar claimed that they had experienced drought five or six times during the last decades. In a society where agriculture is the main economic activity, a first order impact of drought is the damage of food production through a decrease in area and yield which ultimately creates the misery of poverty and transitory food insecurity. Bashir Hossain of Laxmichap union, a sharecropper who also does wage labour, shared the dual menace of drought and the lack of cash:

“Six years ago I sharecropped *Aman* with my landowner. After the transplantation and weeding period I had migrated out to another district to earn some cash for the Monga period. While I was away, the crops were damaged due to an unexpected spell of drought. I then returned but I did not have sufficient money to pay for hiring irrigation from others and therefore couldn't overcome the drought. I lost all my crops including the share of the landowner. The landowner became angry with me and informed me that he would not only share the amount of the input invested for the crop this time but also I would no longer get any land from him. Thus I ended up with a loss of capital and I have no scope to overcome the Monga.”
(Interviewed on 10 November, 2011)

The same situation also occurred with the other small sharecroppers of this area. As we saw earlier, the spread of irrigation has reduced the extent of the lean season to some extent, but it still remains problematic. If other losses, such as to other *Robi* crops like sugarcane, tobacco and wheat, as well as to perennial agricultural resources, such as bamboo, betel nut, fruits like litchi, mango, and jackfruit are considered, the loss will be substantially higher. Sometimes those who are not related to agriculture also consider drought as a hazard, for instance the *char* people whose main occupation is fishing become jobless.

River bank erosion in this region⁴² contributes immensely to the process of marginalisation of a large number of people as it may turn surplus into landless households. The affected people

⁴² The riverbank erosion of this region brought into the public concerns and research and development issues by Elahi and Rogge, 1990; Elahi *et al.*, 1990.

not only lost property but also experienced socioeconomic deprivation through displacement (Uddin and Basak, 2012), thereby exacerbating impoverishment and marginalisation and greatly retards the economy. It pushes households into situations that are extremely difficult to reverse. As many Monga prone areas are typically located along with the Teesta, these are regularly affected by bank erosion. The *chars* are most vulnerable and become subject to erosion mostly during the pre- and post-monsoon periods due to a mix of geo-hydrological factors. I found that in general people in the study sites have had experiences of riverbank erosion more than once. At the FGD in Sundarganj, Gaibandha district (5 January, 2012) I found that on average each of the participants had been affected four to six times by riverbank erosion and one household head in the same area reported that he had been displaced 17 times. However, its consequences are an important issue for consideration of the affected people's livelihoods. River bank erosion dislocates cultivable land, and the sources of employment and income of the riparian people is reduced to a great extent. One participant in the FGD session at Kaliganj upazila (11 February, 2012) gave his impression of erosion and its aftermath:

“When *bhangan* (bank erosion) starts, sometimes we get a minimum time to save our harvest and relocate our home structure, other materials and the valuable assets to safer places. Sometimes we can't. Even if one gets the time he/she could be faced with a situation of shortage of manpower and boats to relocate people and property. Victims of this erosion become totally marginalised.”

(Rahela Khatun, 45 years, wage labourer)

The affected people have to fight with poverty their whole lives from losing everything, even their social dignity – and they acquire the status of marginalised poor. As land rights are very complicated still in this region and the land administration seems to be corrupt, therefore even if the land appears once again due to river deposition, the poor people often lose their land to the powerful elite. A large segment of affected households cannot access any institutional support from government or non-government sources, not only during the erosion process but also after displacement. In a FGD at Rowmari upazila (23 November, 2011), one participant commented: “when the government failed to stop erosion even after dropping thousands of boulders, rocks and sandbars, what little difference would it make by planting some bananas and bamboos?” Participants of all FGDs also reported that most of the NGOs never include the landless or displaced people in their economic programmes (particularly micro credit) by showing a cause of their identity crisis. On the whole, this category of people is generally left to fend for themselves.

Participants of the FGDs also reported other forms of disaster like cold spells, northwesterers, and sand carpeting in the *char* areas. Most of the northern parts face extreme cold during the

winter season when northerly winds blow down from the Himalayas and death rates among the weak, elderly and homeless rise. It is true that poor people don't have any idea about climate change but they now believe that seasonal characteristics have changed and the visible effects of seasonal variations on their livelihoods can be recognised. They claim that winter vegetables cultivated in homestead gardens are the most affected. Low winter food production sometimes decreases food supply at the local market and increases food prices temporarily. As a consequence, transitory food insecurity may occur and poor households, who have limited capacity to buy food and cannot afford high prices, become food insecure for short periods of time.

From the above discussion, in summary, the point is that the marginal environment is playing a crucial role in creating poverty and food vulnerability in the poor households. In other words, a this is marginal environment where the sort of yield and production increases found elsewhere have not been forthcoming and where government investments have been inefficient and/or ineffective in this region. Needless to say, the impact on households varies according to economic groups. However, disaster aftermaths, multiplied by concomitant social pragmatics, have a cumulative bearing upon the socio-economic conditions and livelihood support systems of the poor living in this region. For the affected majority of the poor, the ultimate pauperisation and impoverishment is a distinct prospect (Elahi, 2007).

4.3 Socio-economic and cultural constraints

4.3.1 Landlessness and unequal land distribution

Land is still considered an important asset in Bangladesh. Owning or not owning land influences overall household economic condition and also affects people's perceptions, attitude and responses to situations and phenomena (Ahmed, 2005: 5). In rural areas land is considered to be a political investment – it is invested in for status and patronage consideration and, the more land farmer owns the more influence he exerts in society (Baqee, 1998).

While the role of landlessness in contributing to poverty is evident, the rising tendency of landlessness, tenancy and the agricultural labourers remains even more alarming (Saha, 2001). It is well established that landlessness is both the cause and symptom of chronic poverty (Sinha, 1984) in the northwest region⁴³, the ultimate consequence of which is to force poor

⁴³ A recent study in 2005 on land use in the northern region showed that the number of landless people was only 16 percent in the 1960s but that figure jumped to 47 per cent in 2001. The study, approved by the Land Ministry of Bangladesh in 2005, also found that among the owners of land, only 10 per cent own most of the land and wealth. That study divided the landless people into three categories: i) the homeless (no land at all); ii) those who have homestead but no farming land; and iii) those who own less than 40 decimals of land. The study also reported that 82 per cent of the area's population have no homestead land (Saimum, 2005). The landless agricultural

people into starvation. The land ownership distribution pattern of cultivated land is highly skewed and unequal with a further deterioration over time (Hossain and Sen, 1992) and the situation in the *chars* is worse as large portion of this governmental land are owned by few individuals and even rights over the use of such public land are controversial.

“Only a few families own most of the land of this village. They allegedly keep the officials concerned happy with their wealth and might. The land and the economy related to it are dominated by the wealthy people and the middlemen”. (The Chairman of the *Dhan* bank of Laxmichap Union, Nilphamri, interviewed on 27 February, 2012)

“In reality, a large amount of government owned land is unlawfully occupied by local influential people. At first, such people lease small amounts of land from the government and then illegally occupy and use of much larger amounts of public land. But we, who were the real land owners of this *char* have become landless and now are living on other land by their kindness.” (Aiyub Ali, 59 years, marginal farmer, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 29 January, 2012)

The landless, functionally landless and marginal farmers constitute the overwhelming majority of agricultural labourers and sharecroppers (Saha and Shahabuddin, 2006)⁴⁴. This large section does not have and cannot generate enough capital to go for production-based entitlement and subsequently do not have enough surpluses to ensure trade-based entitlements. But what are the root causes of landlessness? In an environment where land means livelihood and survival to the fragile majority, there are causal connections of various reasons for landlessness that are likely to vary among households and over time. According to Mr. Alauddin Ali “the northwest region is a hotspot of landless people. The landlessness is closely linked with historical conditions⁴⁵ and thus, land reform laws and act of Bangladesh should be taken into account in this regard” (the executive director of USS, interviewed on 25 February, 2012). However, the basic causes may be grouped into two categories: the first one is land loss that may be beyond

farming households in five districts of the Monga prone region were 43.30 in Gaibandha, 45.56 in Kurigram, 39.73 in Lalmonirhat, 46.65 in Nilphamari, and 48.97 in Rangpur (BBS, 2001).

⁴⁴ According to the BBS (2010), the landless agricultural farming households in five districts of the Monga prone region were 43.30 in Gaibandha, 45.56 in Kurigram, 39.73 in Lalmonirhat, 46.65 in Nilphamari, and 48.97 in Rangpur (BBS, 2001).

⁴⁵ A major portion of land of the mainland and *char* areas used to be under the active control of *zamindars* during the period of British rule. The *zamindar* system was officially nullified in 1950 but remnants have remained, especially the northern region, and are getting bigger. The predominance of *zamindars* and *mahajans* in this region has pushed the *jotedars* as a dominant class into the background (Hashmi, 1994). This rich elite farmer group took the land control of their village area through their power practices and were known as ‘landlord’. Thus farmland became concentrated in the hands of the few who control the agricultural production system too; this practice is still prominent in the rural areas in different forms and process. Within this inequality, the re-distributive land reforms after independence in 1972 and in 1984 also did not contribute anything to release land from the large farmers to distribute among land poor households because everyone owned land less than the ceiling of 13.5 hectares. These two measures were kept on paper and were not implemented at field level (Sikder, 2004).

the control of the individual; and second is land that is sold voluntarily for an array of interlinked socio-economic and political reasons⁴⁶.

There are laws defining land rights on *chars* subjected to erosion and accretion⁴⁷ that “all newly emergent lands previously lost by diluvion should be restored not to the original owner but only to the government”. The poor people of the *chars* find it very hard to accept that their land would not be turned back to them if and when it resurfaces. While the aim of that amendment might have been to ‘recover’ land from the powerful landlords who accumulated the land in the past in various ways and to redistribute it among the landless and marginal farmers, in reality it has not worked that way in many instances. The experience of the general masses is that powerful people are even able to use land legislation to their own advantage. For instance, they have often managed to obtain leases of newly accreted land from the government since such land was categorized as public land after accretion, although it was owned at the household level prior to the erosion.

“Since the law does not permit large holdings, the *jotedars* often keep land in the names of their relatives to get around the constraint of the land ceiling with the help of corrupt *tahsil* offices (local land record/revenue offices). Besides, the government does not collect land taxes when the land in question is eroded and submerged. But sometimes the *jotedars* arrange to pay backdated taxes and *ghush* (illegal money) to the *tahsil* office, so that the erosion phase of the land does not get officially recorded. So, *jotedars* who have traditionally had possession of public land often retain the ownership of that land through cycles of erosion and accretion”.

(Armuj Hossain, 58 years old sharecropper, Dhamur Char, Gangachara, interviewed on 19 November, 2011)

In some cases, newly accreted public land is distributed among the people of a mouza or village, the distribution usually being skewed in favour of the local elite. Besides, during disasters like riverbank erosion the local elites benefit from distress sales or mortgaging of land by ordinary people desperate to meet their immediate needs. To maintain their authority

⁴⁶ In their recent studies Feldman and Geisler (2011) also found three ways that the land in the rural Bangladesh is grabbed. The first occurs in *char* areas where a constant state of formation and erosion make them contested sites that are ripe for power plays. Frequently peasant producers are forcibly removed (*ex situ* displacement). In a second case, land grabbing results from government confiscation. The Vested Property Act (and several antecedent laws) were the draconian means by which the East Pakistan and subsequently the Bangladesh state seized property from “enemies of the state,” primarily Hindu farmers. Though very recently withdrawn, the legislation established precedents for new relations of enclosure. In a third case, land grabs by elites are mediated through privileged access to government through bribery and the coercion of land officials to transfer title to themselves and deploy gangs to harass peasant proprietors to relinquish their holdings.

⁴⁷ The laws are the Permanent Settlement of 1886, the Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation (X1) of 1825, the Bengal Alluvion Act of 1886, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 and the Ordinance LX1 of 1975 (CEGIS, 2000: 74). The Act of 1950 allowed the repossession of accreted land by the previous owners if the accretion occurred within twenty years of its erosion. The Ordinance of 1975, an amendment to the Act of 1950 brought about by a Presidential Order (No. 135) in 1972. This amendment is now being executed in Bangladesh for settlement of the newly accreted *char* lands.

on land illegally possessed, sometimes the large landowners often encourage erosion-affected households and other poor groups to settle on ‘their’ land.

Apart from the loopholes in the land laws and Act discussed above, participants of all the FGD sessions agreed that the factors that stimulate, contribute to and accelerate the process of household landlessness are many. We should note that some households became landless in earlier generations (of their father or grandfather), while some have been rendered landless during the present era. They reported that employment that brings in inadequate income means that they are unable to meet the basic necessities of a large household without borrowing, mortgaging and indebtedness. Other important causes like death of the bread winner, expenses incurred during illness, house repairs and marriage, dowry, loan and mortgage repayments, a reckless household lifestyle, high market prices, and the need of money for temporary migration, all bind them to sale of land which they reported as the most important mechanism of landlessness. They also reported an inability to procure HYV inputs, fragmentation of land through inheritance making holdings increasingly inadequate each year, refusal by relatives to give a due share of land (widows suffer here), natural calamities like riverbank erosion, and land grabbing by influential people at the times of crisis for the poor. The old people (60 years above age) reported to me during my informal discussions with them that the time of the Bangladesh Famine of 1974 accentuated the process of inequality by families selling and mortgaging land. However, the factors discussed above are interrelated and act simultaneously, and the reasons of actual land loss/sale reveal the needs and wants that households have undergone. Through the different FGDs and interviewed with the different key informants I found a generalised chronological scenario of the land inequality of this region, is given in Table (4.1).

Table 4.1: Generalised phases of land inequality in the studied villages.

Issues	Phases		
	Before the Independence	Two decades after independence	Last two decades
Inequality	Increased All farming group created	Increased with non-farm households	Remaining almost unchanged
Land loss	High and increasing	Low and decreasing	Low but continuing
Tenancy market	Low or non-existed	Increased	medium

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012

The above discussion showed the myriad ways in which poor are becoming landless. This exposure helps to reveal the complex relations that characterize the contemporary connections between the poor and their social-economic and political spheres. It clearly reveals that landlessness may drastically reduce both their production-based and transfer entitlements and forces them to rely on a class-dependent rural economy. But most important point here is that increase in the number of landless may lead to increase marginal livelihoods, from which eventually concomitant social problems arise i.e. migration to the urban slums. Trapped inside the social landless fence (i.e. chronic poverty), they also erode their resilience in short term crises like the Monga. However, where measurable evidence is available, indications suggest that polarization is increasing and that new inequalities and conflicts are emerging (Tait, S., 2003, cited in Rahman and Manprasert, 2006).

4.3.2 Tenancy burden for the marginal and small farmers

Cultivation in the northwest region, as in other parts of Bangladesh, is usually through a sharecropping arrangement or against harvest/cash contracts, and sometimes the owner farms. Rich farmers mainly cultivate by hiring agricultural wage labour known as *kamla*. But for the poor small and medium farmers, decisions about choice of land and crops hinges not on the size of the plot but on other important factors including subsistence pressure, infrastructural facilities, information base and marketing opportunities. Hence, utilisation of land by sharecroppers warrant special attention as most of the tenants comes mostly from the functionally landless and marginal households. By looking at the pattern of utilisation of land by these groups, we can glimpse how the vulnerabilities to food security and livelihood poor farmers' households in the study villages are formed through land transactions in the tenancy market. Though these are not new, the processes entail forms of class rule and class alliance (Feldman and Geisler, 2011). According to participants' information from the FGDs, there are three types of main cultivators: tenants, owner-cum-tenants, and owners.

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Tenants | Marginal farmers: | 00 – 0.49 acre of land |
| | Small farmers: | 0.50 acre – 2.49 acre of land |
| • Owner –cum-Tenants | Medium farmers: | 2.50 acre – 7.49 acre of land |
| • Owner | Rich farmers: | 7.50 acre and above. |

Cultivation under tenancy arrangements has substantially increased while the share of farmer-owned land has decreased. The marginal and small farmers having land to rent have more

opportunities to make best use of their household resources. As a prominent cause Hamid Mia, (48 Years) a share cropper of Rowmari stated that “rich farmers nowadays are mostly absentee landlord and they are not interested to take the hassles of cultivation and managerial constraints. Besides, their present generation are educated and they prefer to live in the urban areas” (participant of FGD, Rowmari, 23 November, 2011). Thus, the tenancy market has risen in all of the study villages during the last decades with some changes in tenancy agreements between landlords and tenants. There are two broad categories of tenancy agreement:

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| <i>Barga or bhag :</i> | Sharing yields between the tiller and the landowner. Mostly marginal and small farmers take a lease of the land for agriculture under a contract ensuring that he will bear all of the costs, take 2/3 (share cropping) of the produce benefit from the field and give 1/3 to the landowner (in the mainland areas). On the other hand, in most <i>chars</i> , farmers bear all the cost of production and pay out a share of 50 per cent of their produce to the landowner. |
| <i>Chukti</i> | The harvest/cash system is called <i>Chukti</i> . This is where the landowner receives money in advance from the tiller for a given plot and the contract is made for a stipulated period. |

In the *barga* system, the *bargadar* (tiller) bears all the costs and surrenders 1/3 or 1/2 of the harvest to the landowner as rent. The small and marginal farmers both of *chars* and mainland are overwhelmingly poor and usually they have to hire all of their inputs like ploughs and bullocks or mechanised tillers, buy pesticides and fertilisers and so on. Sometimes, they have to hire wage labour for a short period if their family members cannot support in the field due to unavoidable circumstances like illness. More often, they cannot access institutional credit since they do not own the land they till and cannot satisfy the conditions pertaining to collateral security. However, by inputting all of the necessary inputs, what the marginal and small farmers gets in return is a great dilemma (Box 4.1). It appears that tenants devote most of their land to paddy cultivation, mainly *Aman* and *Boro*. Obviously, this has to be so as the issue of food security is at the pinnacle of all economic pursuits they are engaged in.

BOX 4.1: Example of Teanancy Burden

Aiyub Ali (59 Years), Small tenant of Dhamur Char, Gangachara Upazila, Rangpur. Aiyub Ali's rice paddy production expenditure and Net profit per acre under pure tenancy of the Barga system	
Production Cost	: Total Tk. 18200
Average Production	: Approximately 65 <i>maund</i>
Landlord got (1/3 of total production)	: Approximately 22 <i>maund</i>
Tiller Aiyub got (2/3 of total production)	: Approximately 43 <i>maund</i>
Aiyub's Selling price	: Tk. 640 per maund (immediate after harvest as he needed money for maintain family expenditure and repay loan) Total Tk. 640 x 43 mound = Tk. 27520
Aiyub's total profit	: Tk. 27520 -18200 (as all the cost had paid by Aiyub) = Tk. 9320 From cultivation to harvesting period was 6 months, so per Month income was (Tk. 9320/6) = Tk. 1554 only
Landlord's selling price	: Tk. 680 per maund (in suitable time when market price risen) Total Tk. 680 x 22 mound = Tk. 14960
Landlord's total profit	: No investment cost So, per month profit (Tk. 14960/6) = Tk. 2493 only, which is Tk 939 higher than Aiyub.

Besides, the understanding among the tenants and landlords is that the required amount of paddy will be subtracted from the yield as seed for use the following season. Usually the seed paddy is kept aside by the landowner immediately after the harvest. This is done to ensure that it is not consumed by the *bargadar* in times of need. In some cases, the tenant is allowed to keep the seeds but if the seeds go bad or get damaged the tenant has to make good the loss. Hence, working hard with the wage labour and family members' labour in the field and attending always from dawn to dusk, bearing all cost, at the end, marginal and small farmers cannot get enough output from the agricultural activities under the tenancy (sharecropping) system, and often fall into huge debt and have a very hard time in the following months.

In recent years, the proportion of the *chukti* system has increased a considerable amount. In this system an arrangement is made where peasants offer money in advance against a plot for certain cropping periods. The *chukti* system is popular among absentee owners. Most of participants in the FGD sessions pointed out that it is the worst of all the deals for peasants, because any unforeseen event like early floods or drought may destroy the crops and negate their whole effort. In such situations the marginal and small peasants problems are three fold. First they lose all the money which they used for transplantation; secondly they lose the

standing crops entirely or partly; and thirdly they lose the money which they given in advance to the owner. In the face of competition for land in the rental market in most villages, the bargaining power of marginal and poor peasants remains to a great extent compromised.

“If we fail to get a parcel of land from the landlord, we are reduced to the rank of agricultural labourers which is socially degrading. Moreover, a general fear among us is that if the *matabar* is displeased he might evict us from the *char* by force or indirectly create such a situation like cancelling the *barga* where we would have no way but to move out of the *char*.”

(Jaynal Bapari, 59 years, marginal farmer, Dhamur Char, Gangachara, interviewed on 23 February, 2012)

In these circumstances, the landlord can exploit the tenants' cheap family labour and can often impose a form of social servitude like a patron-client relationship, which can be used for ensuring the support of the tenants in village politics and local conflicts (Hossain, 1981). It is worth mentioning that the owner-cum-tenants are a more comfortable group and they benefit most from new seeds, new varieties and they can respond to changes in technology because they can spread the risk. For instance, they can try to fulfil their subsistence requirements on their owned land and experiment with HYV or even entirely new varieties like the short duration varieties (SDR) on the shared land. For pure owner farmers, any crop failure will have to be borne by them alone. This will ensure that they are more risk-averse than owner-cum-tenants.

4.3.3 Non-diversified cropping pattern

The lack of diversification of crops is one of the main problems that make people unemployed seasonally. All cultivable land in this region is used in two major rice crops, *Aman* and *Boro*, with some other cereals (Figure 4.1) and It is well known that this region is a production surplus area of these major paddies. But the further improvement of crop varieties depends on cropping systems and resource management practices that fit well with the environment.

Figure 4.1: Major cropping pattern which are practiced in northwest Bangladesh.

Sl.	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
1.	Irrigated Rice							Monsoon Rice				
2.	Tobacco							Monsoon Rice				
3.	Maize							Monsoon Rice				
4.	Potato		Maize					Monsoon Rice				
5.	Wheat							Monsoon Rice				
6.	Potato/ Vegetable		Jute					Monsoon Rice				
7.	Potato		Irrigated Rice					Monsoon Rice				

Source: Based on interviews and FGDs, 2012.

Along with the ecological and disaster adversities, the large amount of land devoted to subsistence farming is also a major barrier to the adoption of new varieties of rice. Subsistence farmers, understandably, are unwilling to experiment with food needed for survival even if they have some land ecologically suitable for the new high yielding varieties or follow a new cropping pattern which is profitable. The adaptation to and spread of the new varieties or new cropping patterns, type of farming and way-of-life, tend to displace or push aside traditional practices held to and engaged in for a long time. It is difficult for farmers, who have not been educated in science to discard long-held practices. Armuj Hossain, 58 years old sharecropper of Dhamur *Char* said: “these new varieties require a higher order of expertise from cultivation to harvesting” (Interviewed on 19 November, 2011).

Moreover, commercial small land-holder farmers or sharecroppers may not have the farming skills and do not know how to cultivate the new varieties and/or they may not be willing to retool their farming skills and practices. Or if they are, there may not be enough extension training regularly offered by the government and related non-government organisations working in the northwest region. Some farmers are now following diversified cropping patterns in the winter/*Robi* season but not in the *Aman* Season.

“The opportunity for crop diversification in the monsoon season period is minimal due to heavy rainfall. Besides, farmers who diversify their cropping in the Robi season face serious problems to cultivate winter crops at the right time”.

(The UAO of Gangachara, interviewed on 12 February, 2012)

Normally the mainland farmers or to some extent those on attached *char* areas nowadays go for wheat/potato/mustard/winter vegetables/maize cultivation after harvesting their *Aman* rice. The proper time to cultivate these winter crops in this region is in November (especially early November), but due to the presence of *Aman* rice crops on most of the land in November, farmers have no scope to avail themselves of the right time to cultivate such winter crops. Delayed cultivation then hampers the normal yield and also increases the production costs of different winter crops. According to the Upazila Agriculture officer of Gangachara Upazial:

“When farmers are able to cultivate potato/wheat at the right time (in early November), they get more yield for timely cultivation and side by side can minimize the production cost by reducing use of pesticides especially for potato cultivation. Wheat yield is reduced at least 1% for delayed plantation of each day from 1st December”.

(The UAO of Gangachara, interviewed on 12 February, 2012)

Farmers also face a problem of quality seeds and the incidence of wide range of pests and diseases due to late planting. Pathogens are perpetuated from one season to the next through infected seed tubers, which are stored in cold stores. However, insufficient information is available in respect to optimum planting times for potatoes and winter crop production in northern Bangladesh (Neogi and Samsuzzaman, 2011: 12). Farming households reported that irrigation facilities, fertilizer availability, proper credit from formal sources and market demand are other reasons why farmers, especially the marginal and poor farmers, do not take risks in diversifying their cropping patterns. But after introducing short durational (SDR) varieties recently as an additional crop in the *Aus* season, between the *Boro* and *Aman* seasons, a significant number of farmers have been cultivating these new varieties and have even attained three to four crops a year, and this has the potential to reduce seasonal unemployment (see, chapter 7), that is said to be the main cause of the Monga in this region.

4.3.4 Income and seasonality

Over dependence on agriculture labour

Unutilized labour and the unavailability of income-generating activities is a common scenario in the northern villages. But in the Monga-prone areas the proportion of agricultural labouring households is higher (about 60 to 70 per cent) than the national average (Elahi and Ara, 2008). Almost all the women of the landless category or marginal to small farmers have to supplement their husband's meagre income by taking temporary employment in the agricultural fields, especially during the weeding (Photograph 4.4) and harvest periods. However, most of the villagers consider that over dependence on low agriculture wage labouring is the major and most acute problem that makes them food insecure.



Photograph 4.4: Women working in the agriculture field for removal weeds.
Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

Households also reported that the wage rates and increments in the agriculture sector are very low, even compared with other regions of Bangladesh (ibid). According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) 2010, the daily wage rates of male and female agricultural labour without food and with food in Rangpur district at the peak time of *Aman* harvesting (November- December) was Tk. 152 and Tk. 100 respectively, whereas the national averages at the same time were Tk. 194 and Tk. 139 (Agriculture Statistical Year Book, 2010). Average wage rates have increased in most of the villages, as most villagers acknowledged, but it is noteworthy to mention that “at present the wage rate is increasing at a slower rate than that of inflation. The inflation rate is reportedly higher in food items than the national average and that makes the real threat for the food security of the poor as it directly impacts on the affordability of the poor to buy food” (Titumir and Sarwar, 2006:17). Mr. Alauddin Ali, the Executive director of USS pointed (interviewed on 25 February, 2012) to three factors behind the low wage of agriculture sector in this region:

- i) Much of the arable land is concentrated in the hands of a few families who normally cultivate the most profitable crops but require only small numbers of hired agriculture labourers.
- ii) The wage rates are normally high close to the main roads due to the mobility of the people and conversely they are very low in inaccessible areas, like the *chars*.
- iii) The absence of education and influential people as well as remote geographical locations.

Here, it is important to note here that until 1996, before the Bangabondhu Multipurpose Bridge on the Jamuna River, there was no direct road or rail communication with the northern region of Bangladesh. This has also accelerated the slow progress of all development endeavour, industrialisation and infrastructure development in the northern Bangladesh.

Limited involvement in non-farm activities

Effective rural non-farm (RNF) programmes⁴⁸ can contribute to creating new employment for the rural poor and thus increase incomes and wages through triggering completion (Titumir and Sarwar, 2006). Unfortunately, in this region the level of non-farm economic activity is very limited, reducing both employment opportunities and wealth creation and perpetuating the prevailing meagre wage rates that clearly imply huge increases in poverty, human misery and suffering. Besides, households beyond Rangpur increasingly draw relatively more of their

⁴⁸ According to Hossain (2003), the RNA activities include activities outside agriculture that includes livestock, fisheries and forestry.

income from non-farm sources, including remittances, than those living in Rangpur region (Khandker, 2009: 27). In most of villages the poor are engaged very limitedly in manual labour-based and human-capital based RNF activities that are highly positively related to the sustainability and profitability of agriculture. Wage labour to manual labour-based non-agricultural activities are mainly rickshaw/van pulling, mechanics and wage labourer in trade and business enterprises, the rice husking and saw mills, earth working, and petty trades in the local *hat*. Recently, a number of both young and middle aged poor have become involved with transport and have started carrying passengers to short distances by electric rickshaw (Auto Van run by battery). But opportunities of off-farm employment for the *char* dwellers are limited and less diverse because of their remoteness and absent of any endeavour in this regard. For them getting involved in off-farm jobs on the mainland is not easy because of the distance barrier. In the rainy season *char* dwellers use boats to cross the river, but in the dry season they go on foot; in both seasons this consumes time and money, even rickshaw/van pulling within the *char* is also absent. During the last decades, tobacco-related industries have played a certain role in five districts of greater Rangpur, but most of the employment generated has been only in Rangpur District (BBS, 2004). However, Mr. Md. Lutfor Rahman Mondal, the Executive Director of Akota, a local leading NGO working with the CLP has thoughts on this: “the scope and opportunity of the unemployed work forces are very limited to utilise their labour for any gainful RNF employment due to four basic reasons: i) low education rate, unskilled work force and lack of access to finance; ii) a minimum level of industrialisation is yet to take place due to lack of necessary infrastructures including electricity and gas supply; iii) lack of private initiatives (particularly by the local elite) for establishing small to large enterprises or industries; and, iv) non-effectiveness of the micro-credit endeavours” (Interviewed on 1 March, 2012).

Along with the micro-credit, a number of development organisations are working in the northwest region to create sustainable livelihoods for the poor by providing income-generating training in non-farm activities. Most are short-term programmes mostly unequipped with proper support to ensure gainful earning opportunities, and sometimes carried out just for the project duration. A number of training programmes are irrelevant in terms of utilisation of skills due to lack of capital.

“I got training for cow fattening from ASOD (NGO). I tried to buy a cow for fattening but could not arrange funds either from the NGO or from relatives. I could not succeed due to lack of funds. I got frustrated.”
(Amela, 35 Years, divorcee, day labourer, Khadimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 13 November, 2011)

Lack of RNF and high unemployment also create social problems. One of the respondents in a FGD session in Rowmari (23 November, 2011) mentioned that “due to low wage rates in agricultural labouring, many young people are not interested to work as agricultural labourers. But other jobs are not available for them. They become involved in anti-social activities or illegal income through cattle smuggling, women and child trafficking, and drugs”. It is a fact that Rowmari’s situation is different than the other study villages as it is very close to the Indian border. However, to sum up, here it is worth quoting Elahi and Ara’s (2008: 67) observation: “...since the last 30 years or so there has not been substantial transformation in the nature of rural poverty in Northern Bangladesh, nor there has been any noticeable development in non-farm institutions through enough job creation employing rural people.”

Seasonality

The main problem of over-dependency on agricultural wage labour is that seasonal income drops. Decreasing labour demand in agricultural activities in the lean season (Table 4.2) as well as absence of enough non-farm opportunities drops the poor into a Monga situation. The Bengali months of *Aswin* (September-October), and *Kartik* (October-November) are particularly critical, although the agricultural lean season persists in a milder form from *Bhadra* (August-September). There is a shorter form in *Chaitra* (March-April) and *Baisakh* (April-May) as well, just before the Boro (local rice name) harvest. Part of the inability of households to smooth consumption is due to a severe shortage of cash (income) or a lack of access to credit markets. The non-farm sector is not large enough to employ the unemployed who are mostly agricultural labourers or small farmers. Theoretically, it is evident that seasonality in consumption is largely driven by seasonal variations in income, and when income smoothing does not happen, a failure to smooth consumption may result in food shortages and deprivation (Dostie, *et al.*, 2002; Dercon and Krishnan, 2000). Smoothing income and consumption is thus one of the main problems for poor households in all of the study villages.

Table 4.2: Typical agricultural Wage labourers employment by month*.

Months	Agriculture activities	Demand of labour Wage condition
<i>Baisakh</i> (April-May)	Irrigated rice harvesting starts in some plots.	Low low wage
<i>Jaistha</i> (May-June)	Harvesting of irrigated rice in full swing.	High wage rate increases
<i>Ashar</i> (June-July)	Transplantation of <i>Aman</i> seedling starts.	Low demand wages fall
<i>Srabon</i> (July-August)	Transplantation of <i>Aman</i> goes in full gear.	High with increasing wages
<i>Bhadro</i> (August-September)	No paid work available in the fields.	Not employed
<i>Aswin</i> (September-October)	No paid work available in the fields. Some cultivated vegetables but no hiring of labour.	Not employed
<i>Kartik</i> (October-November)	<i>Aman</i> paddy harvesting starts.	Low Low wage
<i>Agrahayan</i> (November-December)	<i>Aman</i> paddy harvesting goes on full gear.	High High wages
<i>Poush</i> (December-January)	Boro rice paddy transplantation starts.	Low Low wages
<i>Magh</i> (January-February)	Transplantation of Boro in full swing.	High High wages
<i>Falgun</i> (February-March)	No work available in the field for hiring male labour. For weeding some women are employed.	Not demanded Low wages
<i>Chaitra</i> (March-April)	No paid work available in the fields.	No employment

* based on most common cropping pattern in the mainland areas.

But there is a debate between expert and the villagers as to whether the agricultural wage labour requirement is increasing or decreasing. The following comments in this context may give the real scenario:

“Employment generation has increased in recent time during the Monga period due to the increase in cropping intensities for practising short durational rice varieties.”

(The UAO of Gangachara, Rangpur, interviewed on 12 February, 2012)

“The demand for agricultural day labour has increased substantially with the increase in crop intensity and crop diversity. Recently labour employment has increased relatively during the Monga months. On a daily wage basis women and men get TK. 60-80 per day to Tk. 100-120 per day respectively, plus meals in the morning and afternoon/evening.”

(The UAO of Kaliganj, Lalmonirhat, interviewed on 3 January, 2012)

But I got the opposite statement from the villagers.

“Depending on need, a male labourer works for TK 50-60 and women labourers for only two meals a day without any cash wage, during the period of seasonal

unemployment in the fields. With the introduction of the power tiller, about 80-90 per cent land of the area is being ploughed mechanically and this has diminished the demand for labour for tillage. Mechanical threshers have also reduced the demand for labour.”

(Hares Ali, 51 years, agricultural wage labourer, Dakhshin Char, Kaliganj, interviewed on 12 March, 2012)

“We do not need any relief, food or other things as help. We need *kam* (a job) – any *kam*. We are always ready to accept any kind of work whenever we can get it. During the harvest period, i.e. the last *Aman* and *Robi* season, I worked as a labourer and helped in winnowing, parboiling and sometime husking. I got Tk. 50 and a quarter of broken rice of the total rice husked. But nowadays, husking is done by mills so I do not get involved as I used to.”

(Monzila Khatun, 48 years, divorcee, agricultural labour and maid in a rich household, Dhamur char, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

I have also observed myself the change of technology. Rice-husking mills have replaced the *dekhi* (traditional husking equipment used in rural Bangladesh) in the last 2-3 years. Husking was the hardest of all work done by women. This change has been brought about by electrification of rural areas. Many auto rice mills have been established, reducing the demand for human labour for parboiling and husking.

There are groups or individuals who are affected by the drop in income of labourers in the lean season as their earnings are dependent on the expenditure of the other. As the cash availability is low for the poor, they reduce their other expenditure drastically. These are mostly small shop keepers selling food and non-food items, very small businesses. A similar problem was reported by Zug (2006).

In the absence of well-functioning credit markets (Ali, 2006a), households are frequently drawn to an informal credit market arrangement locally known as *dadon* for smooth consumption. *Dadon* refers to arrangements whereby labourers sell labour or farmers sell crops in advance to smooth consumption during agricultural lean season. The terms often are quite severe to the sellers. The following example may help to get a clear idea what happen in the *dadon* process in the most villages of the northwest region.

“I am not capable enough to migrate in the town for taking hard job like rickshaw pulling or working in industry. Not getting any alternatives, I had then to sell my family’s labour in advance on a contractual basis (from cultivation to harvesting period) at very cheap rate to Amjad Bapari for his tobacco field. Now all of us are working in the field [Photograph 4.5] as we are bound. If I could manage any sort of way to maintain my family, I had previously never sold my labour in advance.”

(Ayan Miah, 49 Years, agriculture labour, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 December, 2011).



Photograph 4.5: Due to burden of *dadon*, all the family members including the child under 10 are working in the tobacco field.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012

Dadon shows the extent of the exploitative scenario in employment at the peak of the seasonal lean period. The depletion of the already low savings and asset base leaves the poorest with nothing to fall back on. Lack of income diversification leads to a general depletion of the family income and reduces the household access to food. Recently, some NGOs have been offering income generating activities on a small scale. Along with other organizations, there are many *Dhan* Banks now operating to deal with food security issues during the lean season and the Monga as well (see, chapter 7).

4.3.5 Constraints of access to and control over resources and services

Access to and control over CPR and Khash land

Access to and control over common-pool resources (CPR) is an important aspect in the interlocked challenges of food security and poverty reduction. The term “common-property resource” refers to resources including: (1) *Khash* land (property owned by the government), (2) property owned by no-one, and (3) property owned and defended by a community of resource users (Hossain *et al.*, 2010: 10). “Poor households in this region get fifty per cent of their daily food from the CPRs. Thus when the issue of food security comes to front, their access to and control over CPRs should be considered on a priority basis” (Professor S. Dara Samsuddin, First Initiator of Community *Dhan* Bank in Nilpahamri, commented in an RTD, Dhaka, 27 November, 2011).

Indeed, a large proportion of the poorest rural households, particularly the *char* people in the northwest region, are highly dependent on CPRs for their food and livelihood. For many of the

poor households, access to CPRs means the difference between an adequate diet and malnutrition; for others it is way to earn income and a route out of poverty (Sunderlin *et al.*, 2005). But poor households of all the villages reported that there is a steady decline in their access to and control over the CPRs in their locality along with a decline in productivity in those areas. This is not only due to environmental factors but also socially-constructed causes are impeding their access to the CPRs. Households mentioned four basic reasons: i) seasonal dryness of the water bodies and rivers; ii) over-dependency and over-exploitation; iii) transformation of land use (mainly on the mainland and attached *chars*); iv) control of the *khash* land by the powerful elite.

During the dry season a drastic fall of water level in all the 16 rivers of this region creates misery for the fishing-dependent households. The river beds are dry and the *chars* barren and sandy. All of the *jalmahal* (government owned water bodies) also dry up.

“Along with the major rivers, a total of 182 water bodies dry up here during the dry season. As a result about 4,500 fishermen in this district become unemployed. Having no alternative the fishermen are forced to give up their forefathers’ profession. Some sell fish bought in from other districts but in fact they live from hand to mouth.”

(The UAO of Rowmari, Kurigram, interviewed on 29 October, 2011)

It is well documented that when resources are communally owned and used by the different groups of people who depend on the CPRs, there is often competition for the same resources, and this can lead to conflict between these groups (see, Lovett *et al.*, 2006: 2) and over-exploitation may decrease the availability of the resource. Most of the poor household women and their children collect varieties of edible *shak* (naturally grown leaves), arum and vegetable roots, fuel wood (in remote *char*’s people do not have advantage of fuel wood due to the lack of trees), and their men collect grass for the cattle. But most of the women in all the FGD session found that due to over-dependency on the same things, a scarcity of these resources can now be observed. Sometimes, among the households, big quarrels develop. Another aspect that obstructs poor people accessing CPRs every year for a temporary period is the widespread flooding. During the floods access to CPRs is highly confined and poor households have to fight for their existence, especially the female headed households.

Recently, there has been the transformation of a considerable amount of fallow and ditch land (low lying area) in the mainland areas of most villages into other forms of land use, like brick fields or the cultivation of tobacco. This has reduced drastically the productivity of natural grasses, herbs and other fodder plants. In the *chars*, a large amount of land is publicly owned (Table 4.3). Rights over the use of such public land often brings out controversies and conflict.

Although there are specific rules and regulations regarding the use of public land by private individuals under the arrangements of leasehold, these are seldom adhered to. In reality, considerable amounts of public land seem to be unlawfully occupied by the local influential people.

Table 4.3: Status of distribution of agricultural *Khash* land by district (amount in acres).

<i>Khash</i> land status	Districts				
	Gaibandha	Kurigram	Lalmonirhat	Nilphamari	Rangpur
Total agri- <i>Khash</i> land	3071.58	7475.28	8281.84	18071.26	28435.64
Total non-agri-khash land	19172.41	321.94	4076.97	1437.19	284.54
Agri- <i>Khash</i> land distributed	--	2164.69	4915.70	5543.36	6874.20
Agri-khash land not distributed	3071.58	5310.59	2019.45	1195.93	4377.24
Illegally occupied agri- <i>Khash</i> Land	2829.73	3789.20	145.18	1116.86	2873.46
Freed of illegal occupancy and distributable agri- <i>Khash</i> land	241.85	1521.39	1874.27	79.08	1503.78
<i>Khash</i> land not possible for distribution	--	--	1059.02	--	2228.17

Source: Barkat, *et al.*, 2001.

Social and institutional credit constraints

The role of rural credit in affecting food security has emerged recently (Bayes, 2011; 279). Especially, where the fluctuations in income are very high (seasonally or annually) and livelihoods depend on agriculture, credit services can help smoothen consumption in a regime of shocks or crises and ensure the welfare of the households in areas (Zeller and Sharma, 1998) like northwest Bangladesh. In the study villages, households need two types of credit support: in cash or assets, and in kind. Respondents pointed out that sources of credit support are informal (from moneylenders, relatives, friend and neighbours) and formal (bank, NGOs, etc.). The poor households take credit in kind from the informal sector, while for cash credit they have to depend on both formal and informal sources. The poor households often depend on friends, neighbours, relatives or even rich families living in their villages for their daily needs. It is ‘borrowing’ rather than credit like four chillies, one kg of rice, one-pint of kerosene or cooking oil, some potatoes or lentils or small sums of money like Tk. 10 to 100 or more. It is linked to social capital, as widely practised in rural Bangladesh. It is especially women, responsible for taking this kind of credit more frequently. But women in different FGD sessions reported that during the Monga the existing social system breaks down. As widespread poverty is seen during the Monga, poor people become unwilling/unable to help each other as everybody is struggling to meet his/her own needs. Due to the drop of income,

sometimes neighbours do not care for each other and they are almost bound to be selfish for their own survival (Kabir and Guha, 2009). Sometimes they steal neighbours' belongings, hide them, and then slowly become the owner of those things. Consequently, this deprives some households of any consistent support they may gain from their social network to cope with economic and food hardship, sometimes can no longer support vulnerable people. In such a context, it is difficult for people to make ends meet for their household food security (Miaga, 2010:98).

The poor often have a need for working capital for various purposes like repairing their house, giving a dowry, for medical treatment or ritual costs, and also for daily survival. But the credit i.e. micro credit supplied in the field has been found mostly to be investment capital for single enterprise units, particularly for the income generating activities (IGA). Almost all the leading NGOs at the national level like the Grammen Bank and BRAC offer micro-credit programmes for the poor in all the survey villages including the *chars*. Although any new enterprise cannot yield a profit or benefit before a certain period of time, the borrowers nevertheless have to repay in weekly instalments. Thus the system of weekly instalments often makes it a tough choice for these poor and marginal people even to approach it. Besides, poor people who take credit for IGA purposes often spend partially or entirely for other purposes, i.e. to meet their survival needs, or pay back another loan and cannot invest. They are therefore trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty (Figure 4.2).

“Loss in IGAs or spending credit on a dowry and treatment, or the long gestation period of the small business pushes them further down the poverty level. The poor cope with this situation in three ways: they further borrow from other sources, start rationing their daily food and other basic necessities and collect food on further credit. For example, one may repay the credit from his/her small wage but buy necessary things like rice, lentil, salt, medicine from the shops on credit which spreads their dependency on others. Furthermore, they may become a defaulter to multiple sources of credit. Eventually the family is pushed further down the poverty ladder.”

(Mr. Md. Lutfor Rahman Mondal, the Executive Director of Akota, a local leading NGO working with the CLP, interviewed on 1 March, 2012)

But formal sources of credit remain insignificant during sudden shocks or crises, particularly for the landless poor. The most needy are female-headed households, particularly old women. There is hardly any provision for elderly people, except a government-provided monthly pension for old women. The allowance is very small per month (BD Tk. 300) and it does not help elderly people to live above the poverty line, meaning that they cannot afford their

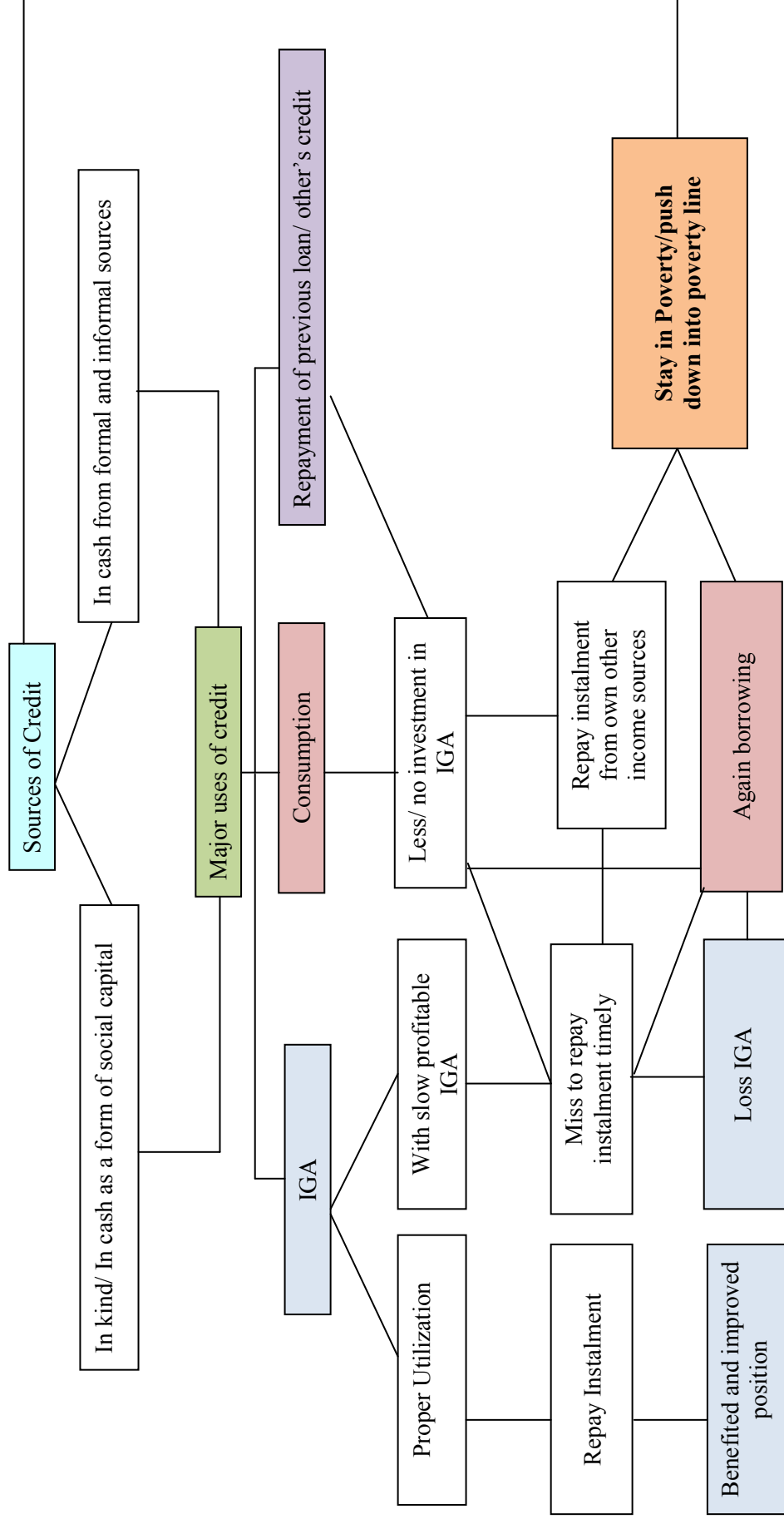


Figure 4.2: Simplified path of institutional credit utilisation and marginalisation process.
Source: Based on household interviews, FGDs and modify after Kabir and Guha (2009).

minimum food requirements every day. A number of private organisations work for the welfare of old people, but unfortunately there is no organisation offering income-generating activities (IGA) or any credit for aged women in northern Bangladesh. FGD participants in different sessions also reported that usually these organisations extended loans to people who had some material belongings. Unfortunately, the victims of riverbank erosion who have settled elsewhere have very little by way of belongings with which not to qualify for NGO credit. Another factor that militates against their application is the absence of a permanent address. In fact, for the leading lending organisations, timely repayment is their only concern.

But the poorest segment of society needs a specially tailored type of credit support – totally collateral free and with low interest. Sometimes they need credit free of any interest and with a flexible payback schedule during the Monga, after disasters, and after the death of income-earning family members. In this way the micro credit programmes of the GO and NGOs emphasising small and micro enterprises impart only limited benefits for the poorest group. On the other hand, cashing in on the situation, *mahajons* are giving loans to farmers at their doorsteps without any formality, though at high interest rates. In a FGD session in Gangachara Union, one participant remarked that “the common strategy of the *mahajan* is to say that the higher the risk and vulnerability the greater the rate of interest. Despite being aware of this strategy, I borrowed credit from *mahajan* as I had no options left” (4 March, 2012).

At present the country has more than 30 social safety net programmes, which are contributing to poverty alleviation or adding to the wellbeing and empowerment of the poor. Besides, considering this complex situation, at present many NGOs are offering asset transfer programmes like providing cattle, goats or sewing and candle making machines with training, and provide goods for establishing small grocery shops. Respondents in all FGD sessions had a much more positive attitude to such income generating endeavours as against the government’s so-called relief programmes. However, households also emphasized that they need food relief during this period. They pointed out that along within their limited food intake related to their coping strategies, getting some form of food relief, particularly rice, oil and lentils would help to minimize their hunger situation. I found household consciousness in this regards that an increase in food intake is the priority in the context of their need of food relief. Regarding this relief issue, participants in the FGD sessions highlighted the necessity of relief for the aged. They mentioned that old people are particularly prone to the severity of Monga because they are not capable of doing any work, thus emergency loans or microfinance is nothing but a burden for them. At present, there is no direct food relief programme particularly designed for the Monga season except some regular governmental food aid programmes (see, chapter 7 for details). Households reported that during the Monga season when the crisis hits

them severely they often go to the union or upazila office to seek food relief but they fail to get any response. Similar evidence is found in the news media (Photograph 4.6). When severe floods occur they get very inadequate food relief after huge suffering.



Photograph 4.6: People in Lalmonirhat District brought out their rice bowls demanding immediate food relief in the wake of Monga.

Source: <http://www.irinnews.org/printreport.aspx?reportid=80723>

4.3.6 Gender inequity

Gender and household food security are linked in fundamental ways. In Bangladesh, within the household, access to and control over resources is governed by a sexual division of labour (Niehof, 1999), with men and women as well as boys and girls having different roles and responsibilities. In all the villages, I observed gender discrimination in all spheres; both away from home in the productive economy and intra-household for food consumption. As stated earlier, apart from some exception, poor women are nowadays involved in both paid and unpaid employment like in some phases of agricultural production, mostly in domestic-based post-harvest activities, some off-farm activities like earth cutting in road maintenance when available, and handicraft making in the NOGs on a part time basis. But women get a lower wage than a man for doing the same hours in the same type of work. “I work in road maintenance work. As a woman worker I get TK. 70 per day whereas the male workers get TK. 110 for same work of the same duration” (Ambia Khatun, a day labour, Laxmichap, interviewed on 2 January, 2012). Similarly, women who work in the agricultural sector also get a lower wage than their male counterparts. Women participants in all of the FGD sessions reported that they have no choice but to accept. This discrimination in wages creates an unbearable condition for female-headed households, particularly for older women for whom these earnings are their only chance of survival.

“My husband died when my only son was just over 2 years old. My husband had two plots (0.2 acre) of land, inherited from his father. I thought I would be able to make my livelihood from this. But my brother-in-law (husband’s brother) was very rude when I wanted to take charge. He ousted me from the house (as we lived jointly) within three months of my husband’s death. I came back to my parent’s house for shelter with my son, but I knew that my father was in a very poor condition. I then took a job as maidservant. We lived hand to mouth. Later on, when my son could work, he was engaged in day labouring. Bad days arrived when my son got married and after few months, he decided to live separately. I’ve my son, but he doesn’t want to support me and now no-one looks after me, I’m old. I cannot work hard. But I need to work for life. I now work at whatever I can get, but no-one wants to hire me. If they do, they offer me a very little amount of money as wage. I do accept because if I not take this I would have to go begging. What should I say to them for offering such a poor wage. When my own son dumped me, who else will help me?”
(Mariom Begum, 49 years, widowed, Dakhshin Char, Kaliganj, interviewed on 14 February, 2012)

As I stated in the previous section that there is no organisation to offer programmes for aged women in northern Bangladesh except the government provided little monthly allowance. However, at the village level the existing patriarchal system still wields control over the women. Besides, low literacy and high rates of early marriage, little knowledge about rights and religious customs like *pardha* among Muslim women, dowry, and restrictions on marrying again after a husband’s death in the Hindu community, all have significantly contributed to make them disadvantaged and vulnerable. Among them dowry is one of the major causes of the Monga (Ali, 2006b; Zug, 2006; Ali and Ghosh, 2011), and can intensify the poverty of households (Sultana, 2005). Households reported that due to not implementing the law properly, dowry is extensively practised in the Rangpur region. Similar detail discussion is found in Götting’s (2009) work.⁴⁹ It is thus can be said that social deprivation pushes female-headed households into the realms of economic vulnerability and suffering as the immediate consequences and longer term effects become deeply rooted in life.

It is interesting to note that most of the micro-finance organisations take women as their borrowers. This has the potential for positive impacts, by reducing gender inequalities and empowering women, increasing women’s health and education, creating awareness of their rights, and enhancing capacity building of the poor. But considering gender, both the male household members and the development organizations take advantage. As a borrower, the woman is responsible to repay the loan with interest and if she fails, she has to face problems

⁴⁹ Götting (2009) carried out a comprehensive qualitative field study on dowry in northern Bangladesh, taking Nilphamari district as a case. She showed that in spite of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1981 and distinctive strategies of Governmental and NGOs, the practice of dowry has not noticeably declined. It is not applied by many villagers, nor does it seem to be approved of by them. The state is not pro-actively enforcing the law and there is widespread corruption in the legal system. The distinctive strategies of NGOs and the regulatory actions do not notably succeed, either. The current strategies are too distant from the circumstances of the life of people and their realities, since they try to make people aware of institutional restrictions or focus on the abolition of dowry.

associated with default in repayment. But the purpose for which the credit is used is decided by the husband or male members of the household. Sometimes it causes disruption in family ties.

“I took loan from three NGOs, but I could not spend a single pane according to my wish. My husband took all the cash from me for starting a business. But he did not. Every time I asked him about the money but he was rude to me and sometime beat me seriously. One day, when I became angry also, he just gave me divorce. The villagers also (mainly old aged people and village committee) made a meeting for negotiating the problem but my husband did not accept. I am now a divorcee with a defaulter to those NGOs.”

(Khairun, 43 Years, divorcee, participants of FGD in Rowmari, 24 November, 2011)

Only widows and divorced women can make their own decisions about spending their borrowed cash. Nevertheless, during the last decade, the NGOs have laid stress on new avenues and potential sources of income for women, mostly beyond their households, so as to give them a sense of independence and self-sufficiency in the social set-up. All of the NGOs have a common standpoint, holding fast to certain avowed principles of empowerment of women perceived as convenient and workable in the rural context. The organisations have taken for granted that women are willing to be persuaded to take on income-generating activities beyond the family context. True, much has been achieved by NGOs programmes, but sometimes at the cost of family peace, and resulting in impairment of family ties and traditional social values. Thus, considering women as the main clients for empowerment should consider the social constraints within which women have to live.

4.3.7 Market Volatility

Market Disintegration and producer's loss

Food grain prices are a crucial determinant of crisis in the northern areas. The majority of pure tenants want to ensure food security by growing staple rice paddy. As most of the farms are subsistence in nature, staple crops are grown largely for home consumption, and roughly one third or less of the output is marketed in order to meet their non-rice demands. Hence, instability in producer prices of food grains increases farmers' uncertainty and discourages much needed private investment and crop diversification. Farmers of the study areas often face a considerable amount of income loss in the local market mechanism as they have no bargaining power and because of the interlocking of market practice with various unfavourable institutional arrangements. Farmers noticed that though production sometimes hits bumper levels, they could not smile due to market volatility. In most cases they are not getting a fair price for their crops at local markets because the middlemen and hoarders dominate and make windfall profits. They also report that these local middlemen are powered by the dominant political groups, local elite and businessman and even by corrupt government officials. This

mainly happens when government procurement⁵⁰ is delayed. That is why there aren't true benefits for growers. Moreover, in the case of rice, *Boro* is primarily procured due to its better-than-expected production in recent years while the procurement of *Aman* has declined and sometimes, government reduces their rice procurement target.⁵¹

The greatest difficulty faced as a result of market disintegration in this region is the marginal and poor farmers who produce potato, maize, tobacco and other *Robi* crops. Due to the efforts at crop diversification, a considerable number of farmers now cultivate these high yielding winter crops. But sometimes the cultivation is more than demand causing the price to fall and the crops to remain unsold. Another problem reported by the farmers is the lack of storage facilities like cold storage. The potato growing farmers are the often sufferers of this shortage of cold storage facilities and this forces them to sell their potatoes at a very low price. This leads some farmers to cultivate other crops including mustard instead of potato.

“The cold storage facility for potato is not enough in this district. Only two cold stores are running so far. During the harvest season the owners of the cold stores illegally book a lot of space for middlemen. Besides, they increase their charges. This makes harassment for farmers and forces them to sell their potatoes to the middlemen at a much reduced price.”

(The UAO of Rowmari upazila, interviewed on 29 October, 2011)

On the other hand, in recent years, tobacco cultivation has increased abruptly at the cost of intrusion on to land suitable for the production of food crops. In the past tobacco was cultivated in core fields but increasingly it is now being cultivated on marginal land. It is mainly the pure tenants who are the tillers of tobacco in this region. In North Bengal, particularly Rangpur, Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat, they produce tobacco that is used in *bidi* (the local version of tobacco). These farmers are trapped in tobacco and caught in the vicious network of the tobacco companies. Two dominant national tobacco companies, named Akiz Group and Abul Khayer Company, control the tobacco market in this region. The agents of the tobacco companies tactfully motivated the farmers to grow tobacco. Initially farmers got attractive cash but gradually the profit margin is declining because recently, those two companies have fixed a price of tobacco per *bigha* that is very low relative to the actual production cost. Farmers would prefer to have some freedom in selling

⁵⁰ In general, every year government procures rice and wheat directly from producers across the country through open market procurement for three purposes: i) to support producers in getting a “just price”; ii) maintain a buffer stock for emergency purposes; and iii) feed the regular public distribution system. This government intervention through public procurement necessarily implications for price support to the farmers.

⁵¹ The government has now a reserve capacity of 16.5 million tonnes out of the total 34.64 million tonnes of production (including rice and wheat). The procurement which was recorded at 1.363 million tonnes in 2012, comprising rice of two seasons including *Boro* and *Aman*, has reduced by 10 per cent to nearly 1.225 million tonnes in 2013 (*The Financial Express*, 13 July 2013).

their produce but there is no option of selling their production elsewhere because no other tobacco company will come to their rescue due to the dominance of these companies. Some farmers are now realizing that the cultivation of alternative crops like turmeric or mustard is more profitable than tobacco. Thus, farmers are losing potential income in the domestic market, leaving a question mark over poor people's survival in terms of their food security.

Price hikes of food in local market

Food security at the household level depends not only on availability of food but also on the ability to purchase food. Households with inadequate income usually buy their necessary food items including rice from the market. If the price rises low income households face problems to buy food and become food insecure. Among the various food items, a price hike in rice pushes the majority of the marginal and poor household into starvation. Rice in Bangladesh is both a staple and a strategic commodity. Most of the calories of the poor come from rice and rice claims roughly one-third of the budget of all households. I got the impression of a common perception that poor people believe they are food secure when they can take *bhat* (rice) twice a day. One participant in a FGD session in Gainbandha (7 Junuray, 2012) said: "If we have rice at my home, we do not care; we can pass day after day having only *panta bhat* (cooked cold rice with water)."

Since rice is the staple food, households operating at a subsistence level cannot reduce their demand for rice when the price increases – demand is inelastic. Households reported that a little increase in the price of rice takes away a major portion of their income and so impacts negatively upon other foods and basic needs. People cope by reducing valuable foods such as animal protein and a common strategy is to take one meal a day or sometimes they eat three times a day by dividing that one meal into three, resulting in less diversified and inadequate diets, with an overall drop in food consumption fall. Short-term impacts tend to be on the nutritional status of children, pregnant mothers and aged people, and year after year such practices have made this a nutritional deficit region.

Households report that sometimes, particularly during the Monga, a reverse situation in price of food items is created. During the Monga period, prices of all the foodstuffs fall compared to the normal and post-harvest period. At the time of Monga, poor people suffer from income liquidity and lose purchasing power; thus sellers reduce prices to attract buyers for their products but ultimately this strategy is not successful. Monga-affected people pass hungry days by losing the power to purchase food. For this reason, low income groups have to depend on government distribution of food through channels such as Open Market Sale (OMS) and non-priced channels like VGD, VGF, and Food for Work (see chapter 9 for details). But many of

these food-based safety net programmes provide insufficient energy (kilo-calories) and make little difference to a poor person's energy intake (Matin et al., 2009). However, rising prices of different non-food items also create a huge problem in the poor's daily food provisioning. For example, kerosene can be stated as it is their main energy source for cooking and other purposes. This is mostly articulated by the *char* households as there is no electricity in the *chars*. They pointed out that the increasing trend of the kerosene price⁵² is a huge burden for them. Recently some NGOs have initiated solar photovoltaic systems in the northern districts but still only on a very limited and small scale. Therefore, a major challenge to the government is actively to monitor the local market.

4.4 Political exposures: state policies, local politics and its localised consequence

This section highlights in briefly some policies and political constraints that are broadly hindering the overall development process in the northern region thereby playing a role in household's food vulnerability. Firstly, it is to say that an increase in food production does not necessarily translate into increased access or food security in this region; but any new interventions in this sector continue to follow such thinking. Until the early 1990s, the government aimed to achieve food security by following a policy of self sufficiency – growing within the country all the food that the country needs. In 1993, this policy was changed to one of self-reliance (importing food from the world market when prices are cheaper than growing it at home), so as to release land for other uses for which Bangladesh has a comparative advantage. Unfortunately, this strategy broke down during the global food price crisis of 2007-08 (BIDS, 2009). Bangladesh found it difficult to import the food it needed and domestic food prices rose rapidly as traders, farmers and consumers, anticipating higher prices, hoarded rice. The rapid rise in food prices caused real incomes to fall and exacerbated poverty and food insecurity in Bangladesh. On the other hand, the introduction of economic liberalization has also aggravated food insecurity. Liberalizing the market, the withdrawal of subsidies from the public services, and interventions by the multinational companies that increasingly control the overall market mechanism has reduced state power. Though finance in the agriculture sector is very important, in reality, aid and concessional loans churned out by financial institutions have given a minimal priority to agriculture. Of those aid projects focusing on agriculture, the emphasis has been more on raising the productivity in livestock, fisheries and other sub-sectors within agriculture rather than changing the ownership structure of resources (Mahmud, 2007). Though the agriculture in the northern districts is very much based on paddy production and

⁵² When I was in the field in Bangladesh in 2011, the government increased the price of petroleum products for the third time (effective from midnight of 11 November) in that single year within 53 days of the second price hike (18 September, 2011) by a flat rate of BD Tk. 5.0 per litre. The standard retail price of kerosene and diesel was then increased to BD Tk. 56 from BD Tk. 51. The first hike of the oil price in that year was on 5 May when the price of kerosene increased from BD Tk. 40 to BD Tk. 46 (Source: *The Daily Star*, 11 November 2011).

the cropping intensity is very high, i.e. 200% compared to the national average of 191% in 2010-11 (BBS, 2011), diversification of agriculture is comparatively low. Agricultural employment is therefore very much connected to the seasonality of rice, which requires no labour during the problematic season. Higher diversification could reduce the impact of the lean season, because other crops have different agronomic and processing needs. Diversification with labour-intensive crops like vegetables could increase the total labour demand (Zug, 2006). Recently introduced short durational varieties have increased the labourers' working days in the field, however, these are still in their initial stage of development and have a limited coverage of land. Besides, interventions have taken place within the backdrop of liberalization of the agriculture sector, as a result of which agri-inputs such as seed and fertilizer have been opened up to private markets (Mahapatra, 2006). Poor farmers have thus become dependent on transnational companies and are forced to buy new seeds and fertilizers every year. This maximum input has led to higher levels of input costs but getting a minimum profit from this causes people to fall into poverty, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable among those who solely depend on agriculture. Therefore, the food sovereignty of the poor peasants in this region does not come to the fore.

Secondly, no significant industrial development has occurred for forty years in this region. Professor S. Dara Samsuddin, the first initiator of the establishment of *Dhan* Bank for Monga eradication at Nilphamari district in Bangladesh said that "the northern region had always been treated as an agricultural hinterland since the colonial past. Later, under an agricultural economy based nation, agriculture got the priority, rather than the expansion of small to large scale industry" (Commented on Dhaka, 27 November, 2011). On the other hand, there has been a major change in the agro-industrial dependency in this region over last two decades. Along with the absence of dependable power supplies, structural adjustment has led to the closure of many local agro-based industries: jute, cotton, sugar, and paper. This has created both industrial unemployment and a reduction in agro production and prices, making both the agricultural and industrial populations vulnerable.

Thirdly, the negative attitude of the government towards creating alternative employment and the absence of industrial decentralization are also factors. A politically motivated negligence of the region is sometimes mentioned as a possible cause (Zug, 2006). Regarding the last four governments, people from the north were not very strongly represented. This may be because General Ershad, who ruled Bangladesh until his military regime was overthrown by a mass movement in 1990, originates from the northern district of Rangpur. Many people in Greater Rangpur remain affiliated with Ershad's political party (JP), which still has a strong hold on many parts of this region. The parties in power for the last twenty years have always looked

upon him as an ardent opponent (Elahi and Ara, 2008). At the national level, the JP has not had much success in parliamentary elections, except the latest one in 2008, and even then it was still very low. In Bangladesh, where political patronage plays a major role in government actions, it is important for the development of a specific region that any representatives from that region who are in government work for their region (Zug, 2006).

Fourthly, different social safety net programmes (SSNPs) sometimes hamper bringing real benefits to the poor as they have been politically biased, massive corruption and mismanagement (Photograph 4.7) and have been subject to influence and interference by local powerful elites. Earlier researchers also highlighted this issue (see, Zug, 2006; Ali, 2006b; Rahman, 1995; Ali and Ghosh, 2011). Investing in bribes is now a common practice, as reported by the households. Usually the social safety nets like vulnerable group development (VGD) and vulnerable group feeding (VGF) beneficiaries are women and selected by the Union Parishad (UP). They receive a card which entitles them to collect food relief. But it is an open secret that a VGD card costs a bribe of approximately 1,000 taka, which the poorest cannot afford (Zug, 2006). Sometimes the local political elites apply pressure to have the name of their relatives listed those are economically solvent and not eligible for these benefits. As a result, the most vulnerable families cannot receive VGF or VGD cards.

“All know my husband died long years ago but I had to give Tk. 500 to the brother of the Chairman of our union to put my name on the widowed list. After few months, one day the chairman’s brother came again and told me that my name was not listed mistakenly, and if I needed to re-list my name I needed to pay Tk. 500 again. I borrowed the money from my neighbour and gave him. Not only that, when I went to collect my card, the officer of the Union Parishad demanded some more money for having a cup of tea.”

(Protima Dotto, 55 years, widowed, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 21 November, 2011)



Photograph 4.7: The cartoon shows how the fictitious monster that denotes "Local Administration" gobbled up Monga Aid.

Source: http://www.hrcbm.org/news/monga_nifamari_11-02-05.html

Moreover, many women sell their cards for one or two months because they do not want to go to the distribution centre and need money instead of rice. Unfortunately corrupt members of the UPs accept this system. But even in the present-day, sometimes poor have no voice against such social and political deprivation. Therefore, these programmes do not bring satisfactory results as set out in their objectives.

Fifthly, concerning the NGOs implementing programmes, there is a paradox regarding their interest in addressing the problem. NGOs have expanded their operations in the region, for instance mostly through micro credit interventions (Shamsuddin, *et al.*, 2006). For them, the term Monga has turned into a kind of brand for their 'products'. NGOs in northern districts can more easily acquire projects by claiming that the project will reduce the people's Monga suffering. Titles of projects now frequently contain the word Monga, such as the World Bank's *Monga Mitigation Initiative Pilot Programme* (Zug, 2006). A local NGO can allocate a lot of money for programmes related to the Monga, but it would be a big loss for them if a permanent solution were to be found. They have therefore a certain vested interest that the Monga should remain in their zone (*ibid*). Detailed discussion about the different actors will be included in chapter eight.

Sixthly, the agro-climatic endowments influencing returns to public and private investments must be poorer in greater Rangpur than other regions. The policy and programme placement across the regions depends on differential agro-climatic and social endowments and location factors characterizing a region (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). This is because these factors determine agricultural and other opportunities of a region thereby affecting both public and private investments (Binswanger, *et al.*, 1993). This is why to be said that public investments in roads, markets, irrigation, and banks are lower in Rangpur. It seems there is little likelihood of dramatic change in economy or livelihoods in this region and this affects adversely the incidence of seasonality in income, consumption, and poverty. To sum up, there is a continuation today of the socio-economic-political processes that have created poverty in the past and thus poverty is sustained and reproduced.

4.5 Conclusion

Long ago Josue de Castro, economist and Brazilian diplomat (1952) wrote that "hunger is exclusion. Exclusion from the land, from income, jobs, wages, life and citizenship. When a person gets to the point of not having anything to eat, it is because all the rest has been denied. This is a modern form of exile. It is death in life." This quotation may be a suitable way to summarise the core issues which constituted the vulnerability to food security of the northwest regions of Bangladesh over time. Households often face risk or hazards that leave them few

alternative livelihood opportunities. Those with few or no assets face the gravest risks since the loss of an asset, no matter how small, leaves them without the means to raise support, to safeguard survival and reduce future vulnerability. Vulnerable conditions for the poor are linked to an overall environment characterised by over-dependency on agriculture, a lack of regular income, unprotected employment, marginal living conditions, poor quality of life in a subsistence level, seasonality, *Monga* and diminishing community support. In fact, their agricultural livelihoods frequently leave them more vulnerable. Within this proviso female-headed households are the weakest among the weak. Households of the studied villages inherit vulnerable conditions, since they often lack any opportunities to enhance their resource base that might enable them to handle problematic circumstances better. Many do not have the means to cope but simply muddle through, drawing upon whatever sources of support become situationally available. But choices are determined by the priorities, which are in turn determined by the power relations inherent in society. This not only marginalises the entire household but also their livelihood is shaped and re-shaped by power relations. The seasonal vulnerability across this region does not merely create transitory poverty. Ways of dealing with the problem – borrowing food or money from moneylenders, mortgaging asset or *dadon*, and bonding labour – can also lock people into chronic poverty (Wood, 2003). The depth and breadth of poverty and hunger have increased over time due to the lack of awareness, neglect and lack of commitment on the part of successive governments of Bangladesh (Zug, 2006). The moot point is that all the achievements have done little to improve the condition of the large and growing mass of rural poor in northwest region, and much less to enhance their capacity to improve their lot in the long run even though this has happened in rural societies elsewhere in Bangladesh. Indeed, when compared to what needs to happen, achievements so far in the northwest region pale into insignificance. Due to the failure of a set of ‘entitlements’ and the lack of peoples ‘capabilities’ prevailing in the socioeconomic process resulting in destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least powerful class in an ecologically fragile area to a point where the individuals in the class can no longer maintain a food secure livelihood and an obvious outcome under this marginality and social differentiation is the *Monga*. In the next chapter I will explore the *Monga* through household perceptions.

Chapter Five

Monga in the Villages: Seasonal Hunger and Beyond

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter two I reviewed the Monga from the existing literature and in chapter four I presented some of the core geographies and place-dominated issues that are responsible for this phenomenon and its year to year unpredictable variation. We have seen that previous researchers tended to define the Monga from two points of view with different interrelated causes: a seasonal food insecurity, and a famine-like situation. However, Rahman (1995) argues that an important weakness in the Monga-related literature has been its generalized discussion and, as a recurrent phenomenon, its relational status and the distinctive seasonal hunger situation have yet not been well understood especially with regard to the *Monga-akkranto*⁵³ households. Likewise, Khandker and Mahmud (2012) noted that for a proper characterisation of the Monga, a number of issues relating to the circumstances of vulnerable households and their behavioural responses need to be analysed. Mehedi (2006) argues that the Monga has turned into an endemic food deprivation and hunger,⁵⁴ and that the suffering of the northern poor is not merely a matter of seasonality; rather, it is extended beyond seasonality. As household food insecurity is an *ex ante* (forward-looking) risk that a household, if it is currently food insecure during the Monga, it will remain food insecure after the crisis season (Chaudhuri, et al., 2002) due to outcomes from a variety of household risks. Research elsewhere has highlighted the need to incorporate local discourses on famine and hunger in scientific research in defining people's own vulnerabilities (Heijmans, 2004; Delica-Willison and Willison, 2004). It is important because 'insiders' and 'outsiders' perceptions often differ significantly (Baro and Deubel, 2006). Therefore, this chapter deals with the Monga issue more comprehensively from the households' own observations and perceptions. It contextualises a series of related issues:

- what perception households have about the Monga;

⁵³ Anam and Ayub (2006) noted that people of the northwest region have a new identity as "*Monga-akkranto*" (Monga-affected)".

⁵⁴ Sen (1992) defined the problem of hunger broadly into two categories; i) famine; and ii) endemic deprivation. Famines are transient; they come and go, decimating the population and causing extreme misery and widespread death. In contrast, endemic deprivation is a more persistent phenomenon, forcing people to live regularly and ceaselessly in a state of undernourishment, disease and weakness.

- what are causes of the Monga households mostly revealed with its temporal variation;
- how the Monga is associated in relation to the household's everyday livelihood issues and concerns during that season and beyond.

Finally, this chapter takes an attempt at defining the Monga through linking the households' perception with the theoretical framework presented in chapter two in order to understand the nature of its vulnerability in the present social and livelihood context.

5.2 Understanding the Monga: Households perceptions

At the very beginning of my field work, one day when I was sharing a discussion with some of the villagers about the Monga at a tea stall in a local bazaar in Laxmichap union, I solicited the views of two old men:

“We never go to Dhaka complaining about our burden of life. So why do all you people come from Dhaka and ask us about the Monga day after day, year after year? If you have ability to do something for us, just do it ... otherwise please leave us alone. We have *Allah*, he helped our father/grandfather to survive the Monga and he is also helping us to survive by any means. It is not new to us.
(Sheikh Kafil Uddin, Male, 72 years old, Nilphamari Sadar, 14 October, 2011)

“The Monga is our old problem; it was even in the British period. In the past, we suffered but nobody knew.”
(Harun Shiekh; Male, nearly 68 years old, Nilphamari Sadar, 14 October, 2011)

These two statements signify that the Monga is not a new phenomenon in this region and that people have been suffering from it on a regular basis for a long time. However, gradually, through the interviews with the households and FGDs, I came to realize that people are all familiar with the term, but they frequently use two Bengali terms⁵⁵ to mean Monga in a generalized way; these are *Abhab* and *Akal*.

“When Monga occurs, our *Abhab* is increased. We do not have a job, money; we cannot buy food.
(Abdul Hoq, male, wage labour, Aleker *Char*, Sundarganj, interviewed on 3 March, 2012)

“Monga is *Kartik mashi* (Month of *Kartik*) *Akal*. We have to pass day after day hungry. We have to suffer a lot; our *Abhab* is increased.”
(Armuj Hossain, male, wage labour, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 19 November, 2011)

⁵⁵ These two terms are also found in many earlier research works, used as synonyms of the Monga (see, Zug, 2006; Ali, 2006b; WFP, 2005; Elahi and Ara, 2008). Elahi and Ara (2008: 17) also pointed that Monga is purely a local term that is hard to translate into English. Being a colloquial word in usage in the Rangpur region it is not to be found even in the standard Bengali dictionary. Its nearest equivalent in formal Bengali could be *Abhab* or *Akra*, which also does not have an exact corresponding word in English with similar connotations. ‘Want’ comes very close to *Abhab* but lacks the true resonance of the Monga; while ‘want’ represents material deprivation, the Monga bears both material and psychological rings.

Households refer to the term *Abhab*, as ‘want’ mainly the lack of access to food and other essentials, caused by natural (i.e. floods); socio-economic (i.e. income shortfall), political (i.e. absent of non-farm activities) and other causes. But usually households connect this with their general food insecurity situation, i.e. “we are poor; we cannot buy good food every day, *Abhab* is our daily situation” (Ayan Miah, male, wage labour, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 December, 2011). On the other hand, *Akal*⁵⁶ is a famine or famine-like situation. Above 50 years old, all my household heads, participants in the FGDs and the local people with whom I talked at different times during my field work gave the 1974 famine as an example of *Akal*, but mentioned that *Akal* is not prevalent now. One old man (approximately 90 years old) in Gangachara said that in his childhood when a severe Monga happened they called it *Akal* and they were sung a song on it. The first four lines of that song were translated into English:

*The severe Monga hits our land,
People are forced to eat arum and wild roots,
And countless people are dying from place to place,
But the Monga never ends...*

This indicates that when the *Akal* (severe Monga) happened people died and it had a temporal dimension as it came and went away. He also added that people aren’t dying today due to lack of food in the way that the *Akal* was experienced in the past. Thus, although the Monga has existed for a long time, it has not been a public concern until recently. When I shared this song with other people they mentioned that this song also indicates a popular expression of the Monga-affected region. For example, Ranpur people are known in other regions as consumers of *kachu-ghechu* (wild arum).

Households reported that in normal times when they have a job, they can maintain a reasonable level of food for their households, even though their food consumption is low, but the Monga is different. In the time before the harvest the *Aman* crop, in the two Bangla months of *Ashwin* (mid September to mid October) and *Karkit* (mid October to mid November), poor agricultural wage labourers don’t have any employment in the agricultural sector and the marginal and small farmers face a cash flow crisis. There are no alternative jobs and different coping measures are necessary to survive, so their *Abhab* becomes severe. The disruption of income, in effect, has implications on consumption for the households and their normal food consumption decreases significantly, leading to starvation. A widespread food insecurity and hunger situation and poverty prevail across the villages. Sometimes if the prices of any essential thing or food became high or unavailable in the market the situation is called a Monga

⁵⁶ On the basis of the famine folklore in Rangpur, Shah and Chowdhury (1997) designated *Akal* as synonymous with famine.

of those particular goods or foods. For example, if the oil price increases, and the poor can't buy, or if the supply of the oil in the market is temporarily cut off, that is a '*Tele (Oil) er Monga hoise*' (a Monga for oil). Thus a widespread *Abhab* corresponds to a Monga. But in the particular season as stated above when it becomes more severe, the resonance of earlier famine experiences influences local people to use the term *Akal*, although it is not exactly an *Akal*. Thus, I realized that households viewed the Monga as a 'different specific issue' somehow in between *Abhab* and *Akal*, mainly a seasonal widespread extreme form of 'scarcity'⁵⁷ or seasonal hunger situation and a dearth condition in their livelihoods that occurred every year (Figure 5.1).

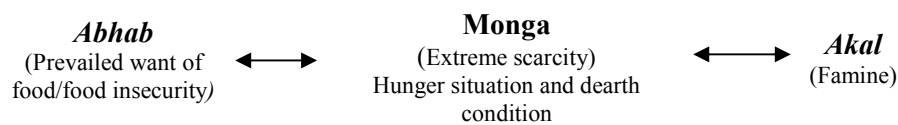


Figure 5.1: Monga continuum according to the householders' view.

Households also reported that if any individual household faced a similar situation at any other time outside the Monga season, that is not referred to as a Monga; rather, as an *Abhab* of that particular household. However, "well-off" or rich households of the villages evidently are not affected by the Monga situation. They have sufficient savings and surplus as insurance for the Monga crisis period. Moreover, they take advantage of the Monga situation in different ways like to offer low wages and loans with high interest to the poor, knowing that they have little option but to accept. Their wealthy status, landholding, asset composition and their networks/linkages allow them to avoid the critical effect of the Monga. Thus it is clear that Monga in the study areas is wholly a crisis of the ultra poor segment, who are solely dependent on the agrarian sector. Therefore, three important interlinked issues come to the fore:

- the Monga is a 'season specific recurrent event';
- it is primarily 'cause specific'; and,
- it is a 'community crisis' of a certain class of people.

⁵⁷ The term 'scarcity', as used in the Bangladesh District Gazetteer of Greater Rangpur (1977), referred to a widespread seasonal food insecurity caused primarily by a crop failure due to natural disasters. Similar interpretations are found in the published literature of the colonial period indicating that a situation was often created in northern Bengal which was neither famine nor non-famine. Buckland (1901: 989) stated that "In Bihar and northern Bengal the *bhadoi* and *rabi* crops may afford the turning point between famine and no famine, but even there the immediate cause of scarcities and famines has always been the failure of the great winter rice crop." Thus the Monga existed in that period, when it was termed 'scarcity'.

Thus, based on a household's primary perception, it may say that the Monga syndrome is not necessarily a case of a 'famine-like situation' or 'near-famine conditions', and that it is even beyond mere 'food insecurity'. Thus, we obviously need to know the situation that prevails during the Monga which might help us to know what the Monga is in actuality. Before discussing this issue, I would like to draw attention to two related issues: first, answers to the question of why the Monga takes place, and secondly, its temporality.

5.3 Causes and temporality of the Monga

Regarding the causes, the households answered by indicating two main linkages: the temporal connotations of agriculture and those matters that transcend agricultural linkages⁵⁸.

Temporal connotations of agricultural linkages

Agriculture as a dominant factor in creating the Monga is found in the people's own oral tradition:

“Our ‘hard time’ (refers to the Monga) is the *Mora kartik* (refers to Kartik as a dearth month) as *Aman* is in the field. Our provisions are scare and go on till *Aghrayan*, which brings back a season of new rice and cash.”

(Ambia Khatun, female, widowed, maid/wage labour, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

In fact, after the transplantation of the *Aman* paddy in the month of August, the marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, who form the majority of the population, have no access to employment from September onwards. There are two periods requiring labour-intensive work for *Aman* paddy cultivation: the first one is the thirty days after the seeds are sown when the paddy is transplanted into the field where it will grow. This requires a week of work for ploughing and levelling. The second period is the harvest, when intensive labour is required. But until that time comes, for almost two months the opportunities for wage labour are minimal.

“In the sowing and harvesting season we can work 16 to 22 days per month. But during the Monga period we hardly work four or five days. If I'm lucky, I can work eight to ten days.”

(Ayan Miah, male, wage labour, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 December, 2011)

⁵⁸ Highlighting the non-agricultural issues, DER (Disaster and Emergency Responses) Group (2004) suggests that “households are already burdened with a high level of loans. The Monga has contributed to a vicious cycle of increasing indebtedness and poverty because, even though the shortage of labouring and the high prices of food end, many people become worse off for a long time to come. They endure its hardships, but at the cost of increased levels of malnutrition, selling their productive household assets, and an unsupportable burden of debt.” Earlier, Rahman (1995: 234) also stated that it is “the bane of the rural poor- the season of half-meals and debt bondage”.

As we saw earlier (in chapter 4), on average, female wage labour opportunities in agriculture are less than for men and are mostly linked to the informal sector and the household sphere, therefore, women labourers is almost absent in the critical months of the Monga. Besides, wage rates drop drastically.

“If any rich family offers a job, like working as a day labourer for repairing their house, they offer very low wages. It is totally inhuman for us.”
(Armuj Hossain, male, wage labour; Rowmari, interviewed on 19 November, 2011)

Thus, an exploitative situation is created in the labour market. This persists until the harvesting of the *Aman* crop, which begins in late November, i.e. after the month of *kartik*. According to the households, the following stresses are created (Figure 5.2):

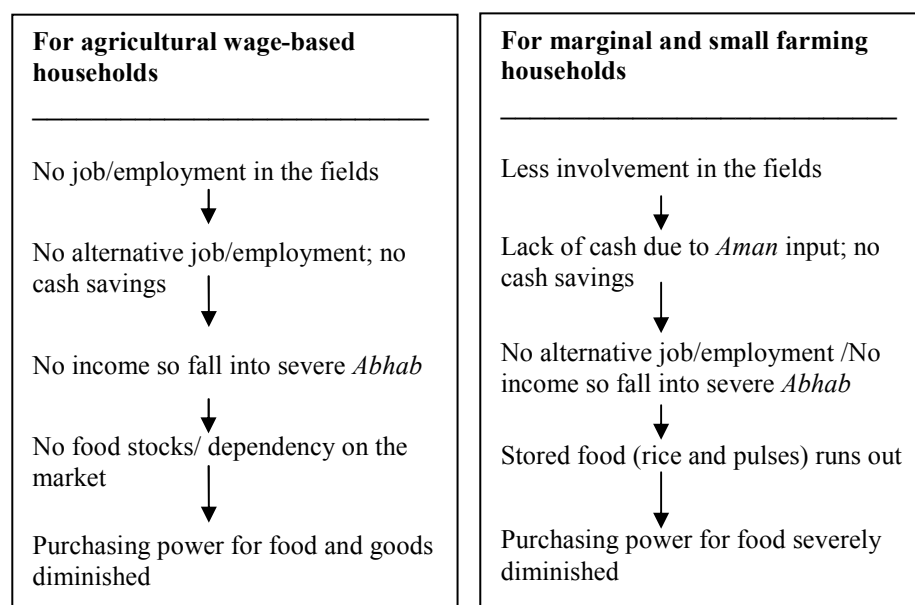


Figure 5.2: Agricultural linkage with household's economy and the Monga.

However, this phenomenon of seasonal unemployment related vulnerability is not unique to the case of northwest region. While the shortage of agricultural work affects all of Bangladesh, it is more acute in this region, mostly affecting the districts of greater Rangpur. Northern upazilas have four days less work days available per week in the lean season, when contrasted against the average work availability during the rest of the year (Maxwell, 2012: 2). Khandher (2011) also observed the seasonal fluctuations in income indicators comparing greater Rangpur to the rest of Bangladesh and found less working days and lower wages during the time of the Monga. Indeed, this regional disparity with the underlying causal factors we discussed in the previous chapter contributes to the Monga hunger that the Rangpur region experiences.

Transcending agricultural linkages

Households also report other interrelated reasons that are beyond the agricultural, and are more structural in nature. Soon after the *Aman* transplantation is over, households' food reserves and savings are depleted. Households adopt different strategies to cope with the situation, such as informal loans from local moneylenders at high interest rates; and day labourers make forward sales of their labour at reduced wages. Some try to contract new loans from micro-credit providers if possible, or sell domestic animals, essential property and standing crops in advance at a low price. Temporary migration in search of work to other districts is another option. Some resort to eating unconventional foods, often leading to diarrhoea and other health maladies. Natural calamities such as floods, drought, and river bank erosion may trigger the situation as these are considered the major causes of impoverishment and destitution (Elahi and Nazem, 1989; Elahi and Rogge, 1990). The *char* dwellers are more vulnerable than the mainland dwellers, and the island *char* dwellers are even more vulnerable than the attached *char* dwellers in terms of inundation of crops, homesteads and cultivable land. Government and NGO programmes try to help the affected people but not to any considerable level. Therefore, from the above two primary causal linkages, it would appear that the Monga is due to a combination of several factors related to lack of employment and income shortfalls:

- Lack of farm employment/income during the months from the sowing to the harvesting of the *Aman* and lack of alternative household income;
- Lack of household food stores to cover the period of food shortage;
- Loss of purchasing power to buy food on the open market while the local/village markets are full of rice and other food;
- Sometimes acute due to natural calamities occurring simultaneously;
- Consequential effect of various coping strategies (e.g. advance sale of labour);
- Existing regional and local level socio-economic vulnerabilities (e.g. landlessness).

Regarding the extent of the Monga season, when I asked the households I found that sometimes they consider the Monga impact as perennial. For example, "I have a Monga situation all most whole the year [laughs]. But the situation is worst in the two months of *Ashwin* and *Kartik*" (Ambia Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, widowed, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012). This is mainly because the Monga in this region correlates with the long pre-harvest time periods of two dominant crops, *Aman* and *Boro*. The agriculture-dependent poor undoubtedly suffer almost the whole year round. In the past though local people differentiated the Monga as *Kartik'er* Monga and *Chaitra'er* Monga⁵⁹, however,

⁵⁹ Similar indications are also found in the earlier literature, where researchers defined this period as the little Monga (Zug, 2006; WFP, 2005; Rahman, 1995; Neogi, 2009).

households reported that particularly before introduction of irrigated *Boro*, the later season was also considered as a Monga and it extended up to the *Aus* plantation in mid-April. At that time, local *Boro* was cultivated very marginally due to the shortage of rain water. Instead *Aus* was planted, which was low yielding. *Aus* plantation was started in *Baishak – Jaistha* (Mid April – Mid May) and harvested before the *Aman* plantation. So, no employment existed during that time and the rice-crop-dependent poor labourers had to wait until the next *Aman* harvesting. Within this time, stored food ran out and famers and poor households faced severe food deprivation. But *Boro* has replaced *Aus* and it is high yielding, thus decreasing this summer Monga. The plantation of irrigated *Boro* starts in *Poush* (Mid December – Mid January) and finishes in *Magh* (Mid January – Mid February), just immediately after the *Aman* harvest and harvesting starts and the end of *Baishak*. That is why this *Chaitra-Baishak* Monga season is now less severe⁶⁰ or lengthy due to recent crop diversification in the region (Figure 5.3), such as the introduction of maize, potatoes, winter vegetables, wheat and the spreading of the seasonal load of work and food supply. But although agriculture may have reduced the length of the Monga season, it has not alleviated the chronic food insecurity (*Abhab*).

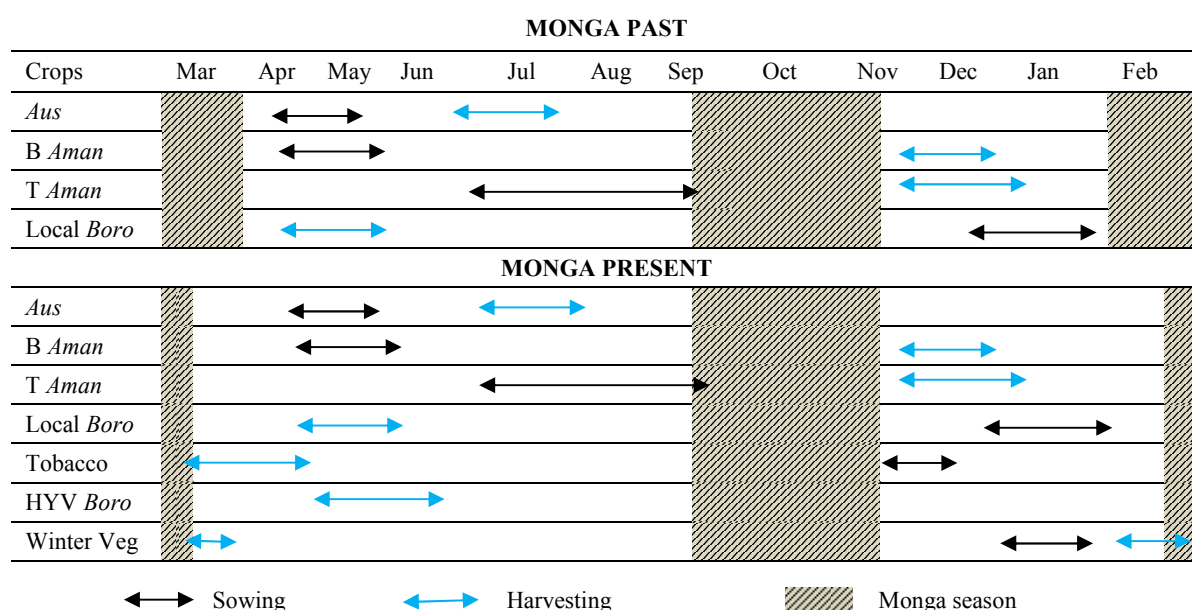


Figure 5.3: Monga temporality (based on household perceptions) past and present.

Source: Based on households and participants of different FGDs views. Fieldwork, October, 2011- March, 2012, and Shamsuddin *et al.*, 2006.

⁶⁰ Rahman (1995) also indicated the same scenario by stating that “indeed, the success of the green revolution in terms of winter planting has accentuated the autumn deficit because the winter rice, *boro* crop has largely displaced the secondary early summer *aus* crop which was harvested in autumn.”

People in this region nowadays mention the Monga as *Kartik'er* only, not the Monga in *Chaitra-Baishak*, though they bear the same hardships then to some extent. In line with this cultural concept, the government and non-government organisations have designed their alleviation programmes particularly for the *Kartike'er* Monga (see, chapter 7 and 8). Households also reported that it is only in this period that they are getting such help from the GO and NGOs; they also frequently asserted the Monga season to be *kartik'er* Monga.

Most households believe that their suffering from the Monga situation diminishes at the start of the Bengali month of *Agrahayan* (November- December). In Bengali culture, this month is called *Nobbanno*, which means the start of the harvesting season. I argue that this is a 'cultural position', because sometimes the *Aman* harvest is late.

“Is there any end to the Monga in our life? Our suffering increases in years when the flood continues for longer. But when *Aghrayan* starts we feel that our burden is lifted. If the harvest is delayed, we hope we can pass rest of the days by any means as we have already passed the hardships.”
(Monzila Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, divorcee, Dhamur Char, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

During my fieldwork I observed that in the Gangachara, most farmers were starting their *Aman* harvest in the last week of November and activities were in full gear in December. I talked with the farmers to know the reasons and one farmer said: “I could not start cultivation of *Aman* in proper time as the flood water receded late” (Aiyub Ali. Male, 59 Years, marginal farmer, Dharmur Char, Gangachara, interviewed on 29 January, 2012).

Thus, sometimes the Monga runs through until December and such variation mostly depends on plantation times after the floods recede. Some households also reported a lag in recovery from the Monga because farmers do not always pay harvest labour immediately, and there may be the need to repay loans in order to avoid further interest payments. The purchase of clothes and household essentials may also be urgent priorities. Thus, households may have to survive an extended period without proper meals and sometimes with no food at all, often ending during the *Boro* rice planting period, which is December-January. Thus, the severity and extent of the Monga period vary year to year. It clearly indicates that the seasonal *kartik'er* Monga and *Chaitta'er* Monga is tightly tied to the temporalities of farming in the area, and that the other causalities are second order. But the wider, perennial Monga situation as the households reported is more structural than seasonal.

Finally, it can be said that the Monga situation is an outcome of vulnerability, which can be correlated with the widespread macro-micro socio-economic and political constraints that I discussed in the previous chapter. In short, it has four inter-linkages of following causal factors (CEGIS, 2005):

- external factors (e.g. natural disasters);
- internal factors (e.g. demographic and household characteristics);
- current state of the households (e.g. status of the households/livelihoods to which they belong), and,
- opportunities people have (e.g. opportunities for alternative sources of livelihoods).

So, what is the Monga? Is it food insecurity or a famine-like situation? Before answering the question as well as to a better understanding the Monga, in the following section, I will discuss how the Monga is related to the households' everyday issues through their experiences.

5.4 Contextualisation of household's everyday livelihood concerns

From the above discussion it can be revealed that though the Monga has meaning and context as an 'event' in itself, it is not an isolated episode or purely chance misfortune. Rather, it is an event in the sense of being an exceptional period connected with the everyday life that surroundings it (i.e. transcending agricultural linkages). The literature suggests that in some regards the Monga represents the negation of all that is normal and familiar: in the desperation of their hunger people turn to unfamiliar forbidden foods; passing days with a glass of water, families disintegrated, and so on. Individually or one or other of these attributes might be found across the villages, but taken together they add up to a collective crisis exceptional in its scale and intensity (Arnold, 1988). Such exceptionality of Monga is part of its distinctive character. However, the following scenario stated by my respondent Ayan Miah, a wage labour, gives an idea of the overall situation during the Monga:

“During the Monga I have no work, no money. If I seek money from others, they refuse. It is a severe hardship to arrange food. If I do arrange something, we cannot eat a belly full of food. Every day I need two kg rice for my family, but I can manage only one kg. As we have so little food, that's why my wife does not cook food in the morning and afternoon; she only cooks in the late evening. If I am lucky enough to get work, it is poorly paid and insufficient to buy food. Sometimes it happens that I get a job and work the whole day long but in the evening the *Mohajan* says that he will pay the next day. Then I have to take food loan from the nearest grocery shop by promising that I will reimburse the price tomorrow. If I fail, I will not get their co-operation further when I need it later on. Sometimes we pass days having only potato or *kachu-ghachu*. We adults can bear the pain of hunger, but the kids toss about in pain. They become ill and suffer from diseases. In some years the chairman and

members of the union or NGOs provide relief, but it is never enough; if we are lucky we can some, but not all households have access. We have to wait hours and hours for any relief, almost the whole day but sometimes we return home without anything as they are often postponed. We have to starve those days. It is usual that I am forced to sell my limited assets like goats, *thala bason* (plate glass), *choki* (bed), at a very cheap price. In the Monga season of 2008, I mortgaged my homestead land to the *Ajgar Mohajan*, and still I am paying the loan at double interest. My wife took a loan from BRAC last year to buy a goat. We bought two goats but I had to sell one of them this Monga period to maintain my household expenditure. She is a now a defaulter. We are now returning the loan and consequently we are not able to save money. If any problem arises, we have not left any choice but to take a loan again, if it is possible.”

(Male, 49 years, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 December, 2011)

It has already become apparent that hunger is the main crisis in this region but the sample households were found to have their own perceptions of the Monga. Rather, I would say that households apparently have different views of the Monga situation depending on its relative impact on them, their own household status, and on their coping strategies. For instance, wage labourers spoke of the Monga in terms of their employment status, while small asset-holding households tended to view the Monga in terms of lack or shortage of household means to deal with the crisis. Elsewhere, in the previous chapters, I have already presented some of the hardships faced by households during the Monga. In table 5.1, I place some of these at the core of everyday sufferings.

Table 5.1: Household perceptual connotations of the term Monga.

Issues		
Common sufferings of Monga	All household	Period for <i>maanga</i> (seeking from others)
		Time of depending on relief
		Lack of cash/savings to buy food
		Reduction in the size and number of meals prepared
		Consumption disparities
		High price of foodstuffs and other essentials during floods
		Poor quality of food intake
		Advance labour selling/ Cheap labour selling
		Crisis of essential things
		Mental stress/tension
		Increased burden due to natural hazards
		Debt pressure
		Pressure of large family size
		No cash for healthcare/treatment
		Selling and mortgaging of household assets
		Child involvement increases in begging or other works
		Push to take socially unacceptable ways to meet needs
Pregnant women, children and aged persons suffer most		
Increase morbidity		
Limited access to social services		
Some specific sufferings according to the household's locality and status	Char households	Remoteness or isolation
		No OMS (Open Market sales)
		Sell cattle at a premature stage at a lower price
		Decrease of getting food from CPRs
		Decrease in support from other households
		During flood drinking water and sanitation problems
	High migration tendency creates family isolation	
	Female-headed Households	Increase dependency on begging
		Stop children to going school
	Farm-based households	Social dignity loss for changing occupation

Source: Household interviews and FGDs, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

From the above table it can be realized that to the households the Monga is now viewed as 'specific hardships' they experience throughout the season and beyond. That is why sometimes they say the Monga effect is a perennial problem. The Monga brings about a number of

consequences for their livelihoods, but from most of these connotations, two common factors emerge: the issue of food crisis and the issue of dearth situations in their livelihoods.

Most of them are more enduring and are formed by broader socio-economic issues like poverty or lack of political underpinning while others stem from a specific event or circumstance like a flood. I would argue that the crises they face are greatly related to household choice of minimum surviving strategies in this period. In fact it combines different activities to meet each day's changing needs. For example, the marginal farm household's activities are not necessarily confined to agriculture; rather, in order to diversify income and meet household needs they are often involved with non-farm activities like *rickshaw* pulling. Though a major influence on households' preferred strategies is their existing skills, resources and social and political networks, in general, households' adopted strategies are undertaken in the context of their real problems reflecting their actual needs. Here I would further argue that such understanding is often undervalued by the actors in defining the Monga and its actual perpetual crises properly. Rather, by correlating the Monga with famine-like situations they think they can eradicate the Monga through short-term strategies. In the following section, I will define the Monga by linking the household perceptions and the theories that I have already put forward in chapter two.

5.5 Defining the Monga: Linking household perceptions with theoretical perspectives

From the above discussion of household perceptions of the Monga, it is revealed that there is an obvious relationship between poverty and the Monga. It is not a lack or dearth of food and goods that leads to the Monga but a lack of access to food and goods or 'failed entitlements'. As Sen (1981) succinctly puts the point: "starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat." Nowhere is this statement truer than in the case of the Monga. In the Monga-affected area, certain classes of people such as wage-labour-based male and female-headed households, marginal and small agricultural households have very little or no production-based entitlement and inheritance and transfer entitlement. They have only their own-labour entitlement and I would say that the Monga occurs exactly at the point when there is no labour market available in which to sell their own labour when rice crops stand in the field (Shamsuddin *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, it is also apparent that all the factors⁶¹ that influence an entitlement bundle affect

⁶¹ Sen has identified five factors: Factor 1) finding employment, for how long and at what rate; Factor 2) the amount one can earn by selling non-labour assets, and how much it costs to buy one's requirements; Factor 3) how much a person can produce with his own labour power and by buying and managing resources; Factor 4) the

adversely those who suffer from the Monga. During the Monga households do not find agricultural employment on which they depend (factor 1). Besides, households go for binding contracts involving labour power obligation, e.g. the advance sale of labour at below subsistence rates. In extreme cases, they sell their non-labour assets at a distress price (factor 2). They cannot produce much from their own labour because they do not have the necessary capital, nor enough land, and neither do they have much in the way of accompanying skills (factors 3 and 4). And the Monga-affected households do not have any mentionable social security benefits (factor 5) except inadequate relief or social-safety nets (See, Shamsuddin *et al.*, 2006).

Now, the Monga does not affect the poor equally, just as the poor are not equal. According to Sen (1981), this is because the exchange entitlements are different depending on what economic prospects are open to a person, on the modes of production and the person's position in terms of production relations within the society and its class structure. As I discussed in chapter two, in a class-based analysis of hunger, vulnerability is understood by the "social relations of production in which households participate" and as "poverty problems" (Watts and Bohle, 1993). Thus within this poverty ridden and chronic food-insecure region, the class of marginal, poor farmers and the landless wage-based labourers are affected as a cause and consequence of socio-economic, political and ecological marginalisation.⁶² Besides, we have seen that within these marginalised poor households, women and children are relatively powerless, which is at the root of their lack of political rights (Collins and Lappé, 1986). Though households take some coping measures that sometimes are very close to the emergency conditions of a famine, in line with Atkins (2009:15) I argue that "the unfolding of these coping strategies is context specific, so their use as general famine descriptors and predictors is problematic." However, in another way, the Monga situation is worse than a famine because food insecurity is 'normalised' and therefore does not attract the same attention to actors as the current Monga eradication programmes are inadequate. Thus, the vulnerability of the Monga can also be seen as the space of 'enfranchisement' (Appadurai, 1984) without a secure 'social entitlement' (Shepherd, 1988). Moreover, corresponding to the famine work of Rangasami (1985),⁶³ and if we look back at the Monga continuum (Figure 5.1),

cost of purchasing such resources and the value of the products sold; and Factor 5) the social benefits one is entitled to under the system and taxes etc. one must pay.

⁶² A class analysis of hunger is similar in many respects to marginalization theories and to 'political ecology' (Blaikie, 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987).

⁶³ Rangasami (1985) proposed three stages that finally ended up to famine: i) dearth; ii) famishment; and, iii) full blown famine.

we can see that it is far away from a famine or near famine situation. Rather, it is a severe food insecurity and hunger/ famishment situation existing in-between dearth (*Abhab*) and full blown famine (*Akal*) and a widespread ‘community crisis’ (Curry and Hugo, 1984). Thus, taking the notion the ‘space of vulnerability’⁶⁴ of Watts and Bohle (1993; as discussed in detail in chapter two) and the idea of ‘hunger’ as a ‘social process’⁶⁵ (Walker, 1989), the Monga can be defined as a cyclical pattern of seasonal poverty that prevails in the certain groups of poor people in the northwest region, resulting in entitlement failure leading to a widespread food insecurity and hunger situation to a point where the affected households can no longer maintain a sustainable livelihood (Shamsuddin *et al.*, 2006; Walker, 1989). A compact scenario of this Monga cycle is presented in Figure 5.4.

⁶⁴ Watts and Bohle (1993) conceptualized food insecurity as a function of ‘spaces of vulnerability’ based on: (1) entitlement and capability; (2) empowerment and enfranchisement; and (3) political economy – class and crisis.

⁶⁵ Walker (1989) defined hunger and famine “is a socio-economic process which causes the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least powerful groups in a community to a point where they can no longer, as a group, maintain a sustainable livelihood. Ultimately, the process leads to the inability of the individual to acquire sufficient food to sustain life.”

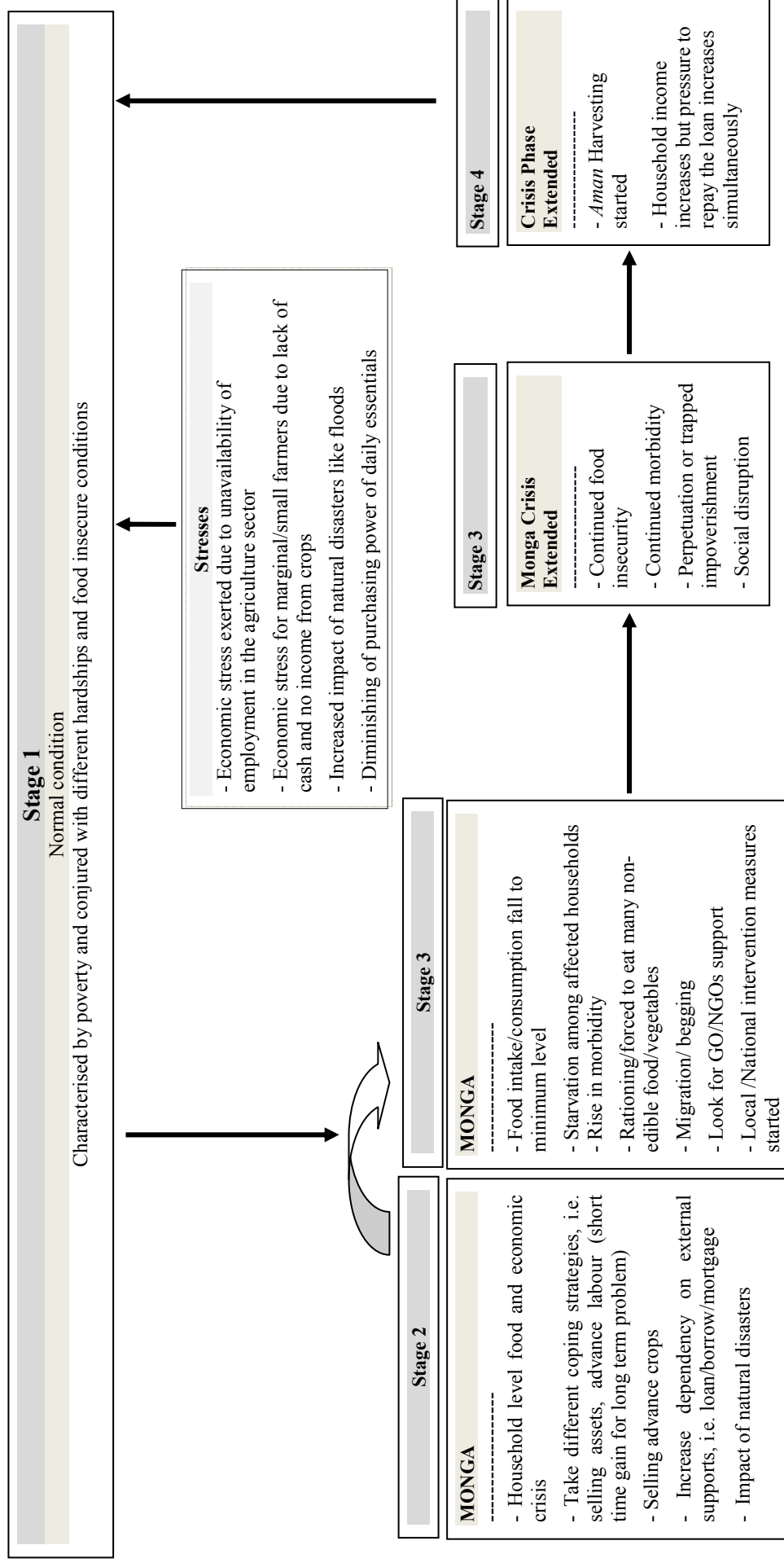


Figure 5.4: The Monga cycle in Northwest Bangladesh.

Source: Based on households interviews, FGDs and modified after Elahi and Ara (2008) and Shamsuddin *et al.* (2006)

5.6 Conclusion

From the above discussion, the recurrent seasonal phenomenon of the Monga is found to be both an aggregate shock and to some extent, an extension of year-round poverty and food deprivation conjured with an array of socio-political and ecological jeopardy. The effort to produce their main staple *Aman* and *Boro* harvest is a significant factor that has governed the way northwestern poor have been traditionally trapped in the Monga. The impact of the Monga is on unemployment rates, which then impacts on household incomes, then on their food security, and finally on their nutrition levels. The simple contextualisation of the households' everyday crisis indicates that their crisis is not only confined to short term survival; rather, the chronically unstable situation results in long term marginalisation and impoverishment. Ridiculous as it seems, government is as yet unable to remove a calamity like the Monga that is predictable in all aspects: timing, duration, nature, severity, areal extent, the size and the class of the affected population. There still exists a lot to do in making structural changes in the social and economic conditions of the Monga-affected areas.

However, the Monga seriously depletes the resources available to access food and reduces the ability to recover from social and political stresses resulting in chronic food insecurity. Earlier literature suggested that as the households in the villages are food insecure throughout the year, seasonal patterns of food access for actual consumption during the Monga exhibit serious differences from the normal time in both inter-village and intra-households. Overall, affected households' food consumption of acceptable socio-nutritional value diminishes seriously and they eke out a bare subsistence living. The gender division of labour in food production, distribution and processing is present in everyday food insecurity situation, and we may assume that during the Monga these influence survival needs. As the market dependency decreases due to cash crisis, households' food strategies in access to maximise their food basket depend on different factors. The secondary food system (i.e. common pool resources, social networking etc.) is significant throughout the year, but more so during this hunger period. In the next chapter I will explore the poor's everyday food provisioning and more especially, the core characteristic of their "hunger and food insecure situation" during the Monga.

Chapter Six

Household Food Provisioning and Hunger Characteristics

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the livelihood dimensions and dynamics of the households with special regard to their everyday food production to consumption behaviour and practices and the households' hunger experiences during the Monga. We described earlier that during the Monga food insecurity arising from a shortfall in income is assumed to be transitory. But when food insecurity characterises individual households almost every day, it is no longer seasonal. Elsewhere evidence suggests that in a food insecurity quest, examining household food provisioning strategies is a promising approach for perceiving the lived experience of food insecurity (McIntyre, *et al.*, 2011: 2). Usually, food provisioning comprises the access and acquisition, preparation, distribution, and consumption of food, and looking at this “facilitates a deep understanding of the inner workings of households, including the influence of personal and household resources; multiple, and sometimes competing, priorities; and social, political, and cultural issues on food provisioning decisions” (Rondeau & McIntyre, 2010; Schubert, 2008). This orientation is helpful as a point of entry into the lived experience of poor households, as the daily work of feeding a family is one that is common across cultures and socioeconomic strata (DeVault, 1991; Van Esterik, 1999). As a decision-making unit, it is well established that the members of each household play a strategic role to ensure the food consumption and well-being. These activities may differ due to the existence of an intricate and changing relationship of cooperation and exchange between men and women within the household, and their social connectedness (Sikod, 2007). The complexity of the issue is pursued further by looking at how specific and seemingly independent strategies actually interlock and to a large extent, is embedded in specific life-worlds (Omosa, 1998). Therefore, the strategies which households develop are mainly based on available opportunities, how life chances are conceptualised and lived (McIntyre, *et al.*, 2011: 2) within limitations as well as how their food security is conceptualised. But it is the fact that often these do not necessarily enhance their food needs, as according to the entitlement approach, ‘success’ or ‘failure’ to obtain adequate food are potentially innate in endowments. The ability of households to command adequate supplies is relative to their consumption needs. While consumption needs have an influence on who is likely to succeed in obtaining adequate food, this also depends on how households seek to procure this food, varied with the sources of this food and, what food

they consume. Here, I would argue that by looking at households' food insecurity through what a household's everyday food basket comprises both in normal times and the Monga period, the daily food routine can give us emergent and contextually-situated insights on coping strategies and other behaviours (Coates *et al.*, 2006b). This also leads to a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals and households lose their entitlements precisely because of the existence of these legal provisions (Omosa, 1998: 31). This chapter, therefore, deals with descriptions of their everyday "food world" to underline their experiences of food insecurity. More specifically it opens with the following questions:

- i) How do households work towards meeting their everyday food needs? Who engages in what?
- ii) What is their daily food consumption pattern? Does the accessibility of food imply daily food security? Does any discrimination exist in intra-household food distribution?
- iii) What are the core characteristics of the household food insecurity situation during the Monga? Do they meet their choices?

6.2 Household's everyday food provisioning

6.2.1 Household's division of labour and time allocation

Given the overall command for all types of activities, the demand for male and female labour in household is dependent on the culturally prescribed division of labour between males and females (Khuda, 1982). Earlier research suggested that there are certain types of activities which are specified for men only and there are others specified for women only (Khuda, 1978; Cain, 1979). The studied villages are no exception, although there are some locality-based needs and contexts. In fact, the daily round of work and the volume of activities largely depends upon the financial condition of the family concerned and seasonality context. However, in the interviews with the households, and FGDs through both males and females identified two types of broad activities of the household members. These are *kamayer Kaj* (referred as cash earning activities) and *Ghorer Kaj* (recognised as domestic chores). I found that they think both cash earning and domestic chores equally contribute in household's resources generation, allocation and distribution.

***Kamayer Kaj* (Cash earning activities)**

The cash earning activities include all income generating activities that contribute directly to the household. These are usually carried out both within and outside the household. Like in other traditional villages of Bangladesh and in a patriarchal society, across all the studied villages both on the mainland and the *chars* I found that according to their own livelihood

portfolios men are involved as the main breadwinners of the households. But due to the context of seasonality, sometimes male-headed households become dependent on their wives' earnings. This situation is prominent in wage-based households.

"I do not earn during the Monga season and I do not have any savings in hand. Searching for jobs becomes my main task at that time. All day I search for jobs. At that time my wife takes charge to maintain everything in my home including earning money from doing work like domestic service or sewing *kantha* (embroidered quilt). Many days I do not know how my wife arranges food for all us."

(Ayan Miah, male, wage labour, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 December, 2011)

"During the Monga season some years I migrate to the town for two to three months. I leave all of my family members here without giving any money. I cannot send money from the town. I just left them on depend on the mercy of Allah! My wife plays the role of both father and mother of my children. She does everything."

(Armuj Hossain, male, wage labour, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 19 November, 2011)

Men also reported that due to social norms, cultural and religious barriers there are still some households who do not allow females to work in the fields even on their own farm, let alone go for outside work, even when the family suffers from regular food insecurity problems. But women in households headed by themselves have no choice. They have to play a dual role every day. As an earner of the household and as a woman they have to cover a wide range of activities and have to make more compromises than women in male-headed households. I also observed that women in all households are involved more or less in income-generating activities. Within the home this is limited to rearing chickens, ducks and possibly a goat or cow. Only women in the mainland households with homestead land are involved with vegetable gardening but in the *char* villages homestead gardening is hampered by the sandiness of the soil. Women from wage-based, male-headed or female-headed households find employment in rich households as maids and as wage labourers in harvest and post harvest activities. Women in the mainland area are also involved in other types of activity depending on availability, such as field labour in earthworks on development projects, or work for tobacco companies. Women reported that the tobacco companies through middlemen provide jobs making *bidi thushali* (a kind of paper made tubing for stuffing with tobacco). For every thousand *thushali* the woman gets only Tk.6-10. Working eight to nine hours she can earn Tk. 12-20 only (equivalent of 9-16p). But they reported that getting such a wage-based job regularly is uncertain. *Char* women face more problems, as explained to me by two of them:

“Getting income-generating work within my village is hard. But I cannot go to other villages or the mainland every day to seek a job because they are far away from our locality. Going to the mainland in the rainy season I need a boat, and in the winter I have to cross the dry river bed on foot which takes two to three hours. If I go far, who will do all of the housework? Who will take care of my home? Engage in work outside the home does not relieve me of my regular housework.”

(Monzila Khatun, female, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

“We are unlucky that we live in the *char*. Due to absence of better access to the mainland we are not involved in earning activities. We have to look to what exists within our locality.”

(Kosiron, female, housewife, Aleker *Char*, Sundorganj, interviewed on 15 December, 2011)

The situation is worse for the female-headed households. These economic and resource poor, destitute women suffer a lot of hardships in managing food for the household due to absence of regular earnings. As a breadwinner, if she can't earn then all the members might go without food. These women are engaged in all sorts of outside cash earning activities, including begging, particularly during the Monga season.

“It is a very disgraceful job to beg something from someone. But I have no choice during the Monga. I beg not only money but also food, vegetables, fish and whatever I need from the people in the market or from door to door. I never think about myself; I do it all for my children.”

(Amela, female, Khadimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 13 November, 2011)

Recently some NGOs have introduced pumpkin cultivation schemes for the destitute and poor women in the dried up sandy riverbed during the winter season (Photograph 6.1). They provide all of the economic and technical support for harvesting pumpkins. Women reported that it has brought some earning opportunities but due to the absence of proper marketing support they do not get the optimum benefits. But they agreed that their production helps them to eat pumpkin when they have no food at home to eat with rice.



Photograph 6.1: The left photo shows a destitute woman is sharing her experiences with me about her involvement in the NGO pumpkin cultivation project in her field in the dried up Teesta riverbed at Dhamur *Char*. The second photo shows a mature pumpkin.

On the other hand, women in farm-based households do not spend much time in cash earning activities. Their work involves the tending of kitchen gardens and rearing poultry and livestock. The sale of poultry products and homestead vegetables are a source of extra income for them in crisis periods. They are also intimately involved in post harvest agricultural activities like threshing, drying, cleaning, parboiling, husking and so on. However, all these activities are unpaid. The young children of the farming households also get involved with agricultural activities to help their parents when they need more labour in the fields, but this is a seasonal affair.

Gharer Kaj (Domestic chores)

Across all of my study villages I found a gender division of labour in domestic work. Domestic chores include works done daily by the household members mainly household maintenance, child care, livestock, poultry, homestead gardening, food acquisition, preparation, cooking and distribution, personal leisure and idle time. Women are traditionally assigned the role of homemakers and spend the main portion of their time on these works and men contribute a little time to domestic work. Women in the *chars* often perform tasks that are not commonly performed by their counterparts in the mainland. Some of these activities are as follows:

- In the case of riverbank erosion, participating with male members in dismantling, transporting and reconstructing houses;
- Processing catkin grass (drying, bundling and marketing);
- Collecting earth and repairing the plinth, floor and walls of houses by mud-plastering in the aftermath of damage occurring in the monsoon.

However, women's work is organized in ways compatible with child bearing and child rearing (Brown, 1970). I observed that women particularly spent more time taking care of their children than men. Men mainly spent time when their children become ill and needed to be taken to the doctors or in severe cases to the hospital. Women in the male-headed households contributed more time to child care in comparison with female-headed households. Ambia Khatun presented an insight on the core reasons for this:

“All of the time I have to struggle against the odds. I don't have time to think about myself. I am always preoccupied thinking about how to feed my children. If I put my personal care of the children first, I will have to lose earnings. I know they are deprived from my care, but who will give money for their treatment, for good care and for their education?”

(Female, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

Thus women as heads of household have one of two choices to make: to stay home and care for the children or to go to work and leave the children uncared for. However, older daughters

in the women-headed households perform a valuable task in taking care of their younger brothers and sisters.

Women rear poultry for income generation, not for consumption. The cash from selling poultry and eggs is usually spent on meeting basic household basic food needs and on non-food items. It plays a crucial role in child nutrition and economic solvency at times of the Monga or other crisis times. Almost all of the households except some female-headed households rear both a goat and a cow, and they spent a considerable amount of time taking care of them. Cow rearing is carried out by both the men and women. Women in the *char* villages take on all of the responsibilities (gathering fodder, feeding, bathing) especially when their husbands are away from the *char*. The female-headed households usually rear goats as it is less time consuming and needs less labour than a cow. However, all of the households reported that selling cow's milk is a good source of cash, helping them to buy food for their family. Households having homestead land cultivate different vegetables according to the season. Both men and women carry out this labour-intensive work, including the older sons and daughters. Harvesting vegetables and sometimes also selling produce is done by younger daughters as well. But kitchen gardens are kept only by women. This small scale homestead vegetable cultivation and kitchen gardening is an important source of food. Women in the farm households also have the task of small scale seed preservation.

As poverty is an everyday reality for the studied households, both men and women adopt diverse and intense household resource strategies to arrange food and also cope with food deficit situations, and they spend a considerable amount of their daily total time on this. The marketing of food for household consumption is clearly the responsibility of males. Women are involved in post harvest gleaning⁶⁶, collecting from CPRs, borrowing, begging, and earnings in kind. Young girls and boys play a considerable role in helping their mother in all of these activities. However, food preparation, cooking and distribution of food among the household members are completely a woman's affair. Men never go in the kitchen to prepare food and do not spend any time in this area. They do not even know how the women arrange and prepare food with the existing limited resources they have at their disposal or the strategies they deploy.

“In the early morning when my husband goes out form home he never asks me whether there is any food available or not for cooking. But I have to cook and

⁶⁶ Long ago, Siddiqui (1982) also found that children, old men and women gleaned grains from fields up to 1 kg per head per day. Begum (1985) found that in the Comilla district in Bangladesh, gleaning constituted up to 20 per cent of women's labour earnings, whereas it made no contribution in Modhupur. Blanchet also found that hundreds of gleaners worked during harvest in *haor* (or semi-permanently flooded) areas of Sylhet in north east Bangladesh (Mukherjee, 2004).

feed my family one or two times. Feeding my family is my only concern and takes up most of my time.”

(Kosiron, female, housewife, Sundarganj, interviewed on 15 December, 2011)

Women reported that though in other household matters their views are never considered, in food preparation, cooking and distribution of food they are fully in charge. This is the crucial aspect of their daily burden.

All of the household members spend time on these activities according to their needs. Women in male-headed households spend more time on this compared to women in female-headed households but overall women have less personal time than men. This is the opposite of the experience of urban life in Bangladesh. Women reported that leisure time is rare except when visiting a relative's house or attending a marriage or a funeral. On the other hand, along with participating in social and religious programmes, men take at least two to three hours of leisure time almost every evening. Women in different FGDs also reported the same.

“Almost every evening my husband goes to Karim's tea stall. If he spends five taka for a cup of tea and a piece of *jilapi* (local special sweet) he can sit there for two to three hours watching a film. It is now his daily habit. When he has no money he takes a loan from his friend and returns it when he can. But he never misses going there. We are losing a good amount of money every month.”

(Khadija, female, housewife, FGD, Rowmari, 24 November, 2011)

But I found variations between the mainland and *char* areas because of the availability of electricity. Nowadays under the rural electrification scheme all most all of the mainland villages have electricity. To boost their sales small to large tea stalls now have televisions and DVDs and show films. Some males are addicted and spend time there in the evening. In the *char* areas there is no electricity so most of the men return their home at dusk. They pass their leisure time in the open playing cards or gossiping with their friends.

In the above section, it has discussed the daily efforts (individual or jointly) of the studied households members to their assigned labour for maintaining their daily lives. Based on my household observations and interviews, I then made an attempt to describe the time men and women allocate to their daily production, consumption and other activities (Table 6.1). It is clear that the gender division of labour in the study villages underscores that both men and women are the mainstay of day-to-day family subsistence. Time use information also indicates a tremendous work burden for women on domestic chores as compared to their total time spent in cash earning. This indicates that the transfer of basic economic rights to contribute to household economy and increase in entitlements to their own food security is limited. Sen (1990) has stated that access to “gainful work outside” strengthens women's fallback position

Table 6.1: Activities and approximate time use * of the households.

	Male-headed wage-based households		Male-headed farming-based households		Female-headed households	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Extent of hours for all activities	12 hours (7 am to 7 pm)	13 and half hours (6 am to 7: 30 pm)	13 hours (6 am to 7 pm)	13 and half hours (6 am to 7: 30 pm)		15 and half hours (5 am to 8:30 pm)
Cash earning activities	Seven hours	Four hours	Eight hours	In seasonal basis (Mainly post harvest)		Eight hours
Household maintenance	Not regular	Three hours	One hour	Four hours		Two hours
Domestic						
Child care	Not regular	Two hours (not in specific time)	Not regular	Two hours		One hour (not in specific time)
Chores						
Livestock, poultry and homestead gardening	Two hours	One hours	Two hours	Three hours		Half an hour
Food acquisition, preparation, cooking and distribution	One hour	Three hours	One hour	Three hours		Four hours
Personal, leisure and others	One hour	Half an hour	One hour	One hour		Very seldom

Source: Households observation and interviews, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

* Time allocation has been documented based on their narratives as their time use in different activities depends on seasonality. It varies between individual households and also in the location of the household whether in the *char* or mainland. It is thus a general scenario of time allocation. For example, during the floods both male and female work much less as they remain confined to their households due to inundation. The summer season is a time for hard work when savings in cash and kind can be made to be consumed later in times of crisis or flooding. In winter the days are shorter, and more work has to be performed as it is also the season of harvesting and social occasions.

and bargaining power in the household. Therefore, this in turn reduces their influence on household decision-making and the distributive process. Though households reported that while the division of time between men and women may have changed, I would point out that this should not be interpreted as a loss of power or influence of men to women. As we conceptualised that vulnerability refers to powerlessness and the literature showed that women and children are more vulnerable to the Monga, thus it can be said that tradition gives them less decision-making power and less control over assets than men, while at the same time their opportunities to engage in remunerative activities, and therefore to acquire their own assets, are more limited (Sikod, 2007: 65). Though men's contribution in food production and access to food through income is much higher than women's, the role of women in food security is also visible in food access and utilisation. Though limited, they spend a greater proportion of their additional income (e.g. selling hens or vegetables) on family needs. If not through production or income, they are responsible for making food available to their families then by collecting/managing from different sources (i.e. CPRs or in kind) or compromising on their own food intake during periods of food shortage. The latter is an important coping mechanism for food security during the Monga. Thus, by looking separately at their paid and unpaid labour it is possible to understand women's invisible role in food security in a better way (Choudhary and Parthasarathy, 2007: 527). However, all households reported that during the Monga period both men's and women's involvement in cash earning activities is greatly reduced. They are forced to take idle time. Men far more than women in their households spend long hours in idleness, however, the situation is worse for women in female-headed households. All of the household's food provisioning strategies become weaker. Considering their every day efforts in various activities and the gendered division of labour and time, I will discuss in the following sections what actually exists in their daily food basket and what food they consume during this seasonal crisis. Prior to that I will also look at people's perceptions on food in/security and how they acquire their everyday food.

6.2.2 Household's perceptions about food in/security

As a subjective phenomenon, the household perception is considered an important appraiser for food in/security study (Corrêa, 2007). It may be possible, for instance, to see if people are aware that the right to eat is part of their daily life (Sampaio *et al.*, 2006; Corrêa, 2007). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s report of measurement of food insecurity and hunger (National Research Council, 2005: 32) noted that:

“... the concepts of food uncertainty and food insufficiency are really household-level concepts. Each implies decisions about household resource allocation. Worrying about having enough money to pay for food is a response that considers constraints on the household's resources. Cutting meal size and

not being able to afford a balanced meal are also adaptations made with consideration of the entire household's resources”

I asked the household heads what perception they have about food security and their own food security status based on food production, purchasing power and access to food and common resources. With a few exceptions, I found almost the same perceptions of ‘food security’ among the interviewed households. Most do not know the literal meaning of the term ‘food security’ but they feel confident about their own perception in some ways. Within households, men and women also embrace almost the same perceptions about food security:

“My family members would be pleased if we can eat adequate amount of rice three times a day with vegetables or dal or even with red chilli. We would prefer more than that but it is beyond our capacity”.

(Ayan Miah, male, wage labour, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 December, 2011)

“It is enough if I can eat warm rice with dal twice a day with a full belly.”

(Armuj Hossain, male, wage labour, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 19 November, 2011)

“I do not need fish or meat; only rice with *salun* (vegetable with gravy) three times rather makes me happy.”

(Ambia Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, widowed, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

I found a common perception that food security is taken to mean satisfying the belly full of rice with preferably at least one kind of vegetable or dal, and to the very poor I found that it is just to have a full stomach, maybe just cooked rice soaked in water overnight (*panta bhat*) with red chilli and salt. However, the household perceptions about food security vary with economic status so that farming households hold slightly different perceptions. A meal consisting of rice with vegetables or dal may be considered as side dishes only for them. Thus, given the same amount or same types of foods, it is more likely for the farm households to report food insecurity compared to the wage labour or women-headed households:

“I can mange rice and a vegetable or dal on regular basis either two or three times a day except during the floods or the Monga. But if I can arrange fish or egg on a regular basis, I will be happy that my family are getting good foods.”

(Amzad Miah, male, small farmer, Aleker *Char*, Sundarganj, interviewed on 27 December, 2011)

“I try to manage three meals a day for my family. It is not only rice with chillies or vegetables. I try to manage fish, egg, dal and meat for my family.”

(Jaynal Bapari, male, marginal farmer, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 23 February, 2012)

Moreover, the farming household also feels food secure if they have a stock of rice or other dry food at home. More particularly the *Char* women think that if they have a food stock of enough rice and pulses at home they feel more food secure. I found that women prefer to have a stock of food at home over having money in hand. For example, “My husband cannot save money. He spends money for other purposes than food. But if I have food in stock then I can use it for consumption” (Kosiron, female, housewife, Sundarganj, interviewed on 15 December, 2011). This is particularly because of the remoteness of their locality from the regular market. Indeed there is no regular bazaar or market in the *chars*. People have to depend on the mainland markets or periodic *hats*. However, it is understandable that the perceptions of food security differ between non-farm and farm households, but need more explanation of the household food insecurity context. Though the wage-labour or female-headed poor households do not often take fish, meat or chicken, they showed a strong desire have these ‘*bhalo khabar*’ (good foods). To better-off farming households, food security means a variety of other foods in a meal besides rice. When I asked them what they mean as ‘good food’ they responded:

“Rice with one vegetable is not a good meal. Small fishes, egg, milk have vitamins.”

(Ambia Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, widowed, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

“What we eat it is just for filling the belly. Day after day we are taking the same food with little exception on the eid days (Muslim religious festival day). These are not good foods. We do not know which food contains what vitamin but we know that big fishes, meat, milk and egg are not only delicious to eat but are rich in nutrition.”

(Ayan Miah, male, wage labour, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 December, 2011)

As nowadays most households have a radio, they can listen to programmes about health and nutrition. Besides, current programmes regarding health and nutrition issues in radio, television (which they mostly watch at the tea stall in the nearby local bazaar in their evening leisure time), and advocacy by health workers of NGOs are improving their knowledge regarding different diseases and nutritious foods. Some of their ideas are:

“Little fish is effective for eyesight and vegetables contain lots of vitamins.”

(Protima Dotto, female, maid/wage labour, widowed, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 21 November, 2011)

“*Ratkana* (night blindness) disease can be prevented by eating *mala*, *dhela* and other small fishes.”

(Hares Miah, male, wage labour, Dakhshin *Char*, Kaliganj, interviewed on 12 March, 2012)

“*Sastho Apa* (Health worker sister of NGO) told us that yellow fruits, milk and vegetables, small fish have nutrition.”
(Ambia Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, widowed, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

But it is the fact that while there seems to be some knowledge and awareness, the main constraints to a balanced diet lie elsewhere – in poverty and low incomes. Another dimension is related to whether market shocks and high prices disrupt households’ access to nutritious foods. Rather, the items that follow appear to reflect within-the-home adjustment strategies to cope with constrained resources are buying fewer essential foods for children, reducing the usual number of home meals, household members eating less food, and adults reducing the number of usual meals or eating less at the main meal. During the interviews I also asked the household head to assess their own food security condition by thinking about their own food consumption⁶⁷. I found that households defined their food security status in two categories—severe (chronic) food shortage, and occasional (transitory) food shortages. Most of the households face constant food insufficiency and face starvation almost every day. The intensity of their starvation increases in some particular months of the year as stated earlier during the Monga season.

6.2.3 Household food acquisition

I observed the households’ daily food provisioning efforts and their extraordinary and continuing hardship in acquiring adequate food – with an attestation of the short period of adequate food access, particularly in the post harvest period. Most of the households food expenditure is more than half of their monthly earnings. But obtaining adequate food every day is a regular preoccupation and a persistent struggle for all interviewed households. I asked the household heads a simple question: ‘how do you acquire food?’ I found that access to food acquisition and storage varied significantly among the group but for most food acquisition is predominantly limited to what they are able to purchase and it indicates that purchasing staples on a daily basis is a strong indicator of food insecurity. However, there are five sources through which households are able to acquire their daily main food, rice, and other basic food requirements. These are: i) own production; ii) purchase from the local market; iii) in-kind wages; iv) borrowing from neighbours or relatives; and, v) collected from CPRs (Table 6.2).

⁶⁷ It is noteworthy to mention that assessing household food security in terms of self-evaluation of subjective indicators (US government initiated approach based on scores derived from 18 questions on food-related behaviour and condition) have been implemented successfully in a number of developing countries (Kennedy, 2003). It has also been tested and applied in Bangladesh (Coates *et al.*, 2006b).

Table 6.2: Household level food access and acquisition.

Types of the household	Food access status
Female-headed (Landless with no homestead land/ with homestead)	No rice/cereal available through production
	Collect some rice and potatoes through post-harvest gleaning
	No homestead/limited gardening vegetables (in seasonal basis)
	No poultry/ limited poultry
	Cattle rearing (mainly goat)
	Major portion of food come from market purchase
	Highly dependent on CPRs.
	Frequently taken food gifts and borrowing from neighbours
	Seasonal fruits in kind
Male-headed (Agriculture or other wage labourer)	Limited food aid through VGD programme (in irregular basis)
	No rice/cereal available through production
	Get rice or other crops as in-kind wages
	Limited homestead gardening of vegetables (in seasonal basis)
	Sometimes fishing for both selling and consumption (on seasonal basis)
	Limited poultry (mainly chicken/ducks for selling purposes not consumption; but in emergencies they consume)
	Major portion of food purchased from market
	Dependent on CPRs
	Take food gift and borrowing from neighbours in emergency
	Buy seasonal fruits from market
	Get food as wage through food for work programmes (when available)
	Seasonal migration on contract basis to collect rice or circular migration (male person)

Types of the household	Food access status
Male-headed (Marginal Farmer)	Major portion of rice/cereal available through production (with periodic shortfall)
	Vegetable production (mainly in the winter season for commercial purpose)
	Homestead vegetables production (almost year round)
	Sometimes fishing for consumptions (in seasonal basis)
	Small fish and other foods purchased from local market (mostly regularly)
	Big fish/meat bought from market (irregular basis; when sufficient cash in hand after harvest period)
	Poultry (chicken/ducks for both selling eggs and own consumption)/milk consumed through own production
	Purchase other necessary non-farm foods from market
	Seasonal local fruits purchased from market and own some local fruits trees
	Purchase some imported fruits (like apple, orange, grapes, etc.) from market once or twice a year
Male-headed (Small Farmer)	Rice/cereal available through production (with periodic shortfall: purchase from market)
	Non-staples (pulse) own production
	Homestead vegetables production (almost year round)
	Small/big fish and other foods purchased from local market (mostly regularly)
	Meat from market purchase
	Poultry (chicken/ducks for both selling eggs and own consumption)/milk consumed through own production
	Purchase of other necessary non-farm foods from market; tendency to store more non-farm food at home
	Seasonal local fruits purchased from market and own some local fruit trees
	Purchase some imported fruits (like apple, orange, grape etc.) from market once or twice a year

Source: Fieldwork, November, 2011- March, 2012.

Among the studied households, access to the main staples (rice and wheat) from their own production is very limited. Even the households engaged in farming, particularly rice paddy, did not meet household requirements. Households have to make choices on how much they store and how much they sell. Marginal and small farmers largely sell their whole yield for cash to cover household food and other necessities, paying off loans, or saving money for further agricultural inputs. That's why most buy a portion of their rice from the market during the Monga. It is common that widowed or divorced women or women from poor male-headed households collect some rice and potatoes through post-harvest gleaning. In the *char* areas the seasonal migration of men to the mainland on a contract basis to obtain rice is common among poor households. Some perishable food crops such as vegetables, for instance potato, do not store well at the household level, and so are sold in the market.

Households engaged in wage labour or other non-farm activities have little capacity to grow food, and these households cannot afford to buy enough for long periods of time. In the mainland villages, poor households regularly buy only what they need as they are dependent on daily wages. But in the *char* areas they buy staple foods at least twice a week due to the absence of a regular market. Though destitute women who have a VGD card should get thirty kilos of rice/wheat per month for a period of eighteen months, usually they get only twenty five or less of wheat at three to four month intervals. Female-headed households reported that they usually sell that wheat below the market price and use the money to buy other foods including the rice for their household consumption. I found that in the studied villages, particularly in the *char* areas there is a complete absence of government subsidized food support schemes, i.e. open market sale (OMS).

Some of the locally produced/procured items in the *char* and village areas are *chira*/puffed rice, eggs, leafy vegetables and milk etc. This suggests that household access is still largely based on the availability of locally grown produce and will no doubt be highly seasonal. The women from poor households gather green leaves, collect naturally grown vegetables like arum from the fields of kin or neighbours and from commercial production fields in return for picking vegetables. However, households tend to utilise lower level markets such as *hats*, and nearby *mudi dokan* (small grocery shop) and most of households prefer to buy their daily vegetables from temporary evening bazaars (Photograph 6.2). The poor households and marginal farmers are the main customers of these small bazaars. I visited a few evening bazaars and talked with the customers. They informed me that the sellers in these bazaars are also poor and they run their families hand to mouth. So they need cash to buy the basic foodstuffs and other household needs after selling their goods. As the customers are also poor like them, they do not hike prices too much; rather, they prefer to offload perishable foods. So

the benefits to the poor sellers and buyers are reciprocal. One fish seller, Monower Hossain, in an evening bazaar in Sundarganj (conversation, 7 January, 2012) shared with me some interesting information:

“Sometimes poor people living in nearby villages stand in front of my temporary fish selling shop for hours. I know they are not real buyers. I put aside the *pocha gala* (putrefying fish) and keep them separately. I ask a very low price for the bad quality. The poor buy these after negotiation with me at a price even cheaper than I asked. Some days, when I cannot sell these fish, the poor who are waiting cordially beg them for their household. Some do this day after day. Maybe this is the only way they eat fish at home.”

The *char* areas differ from the poor group in general by sourcing more of the traditional food items from local and home produced because a local bazaar or hat is absent in the *char* areas. Marginal and small farmers go to the big bazaar at the union or upazila level and they also go to the weekly hat both for selling their own produced crops and products and buying necessary foods and other non-food items. Wage labour-based male households and female-headed households frequently borrow food items from their kin and neighbours who are comparatively well-off and women are solely responsible for borrowing these food items. Usually they repay the same items in same amount immediately after shopping. But households reported that this practice seems to be declining nowadays.



Photograph 6.2: The temporary evening bazaars.
Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

Household food access is extremely tenuous and intimately linked to available resources and purchasing power at any given moment, with most households buying small quantities of food as resources permit. Households routinely stretch their resources to feed all of their family members and to avoid running out of food for the next meal. The following section thus discusses what food households consume every day.

6.2.4 Household's everyday food

When I started my fieldwork I got a chance to observe those days when the poor households were suffering from the Monga. I observed their severe hardship in their livelihoods and how they were struggling to take food at least twice a day. But it is not only at the time of Monga, as I documented in chapter four, that widespread poverty and other associated vulnerabilities have a very harsh impact on their every day food consumption and nutritional intake. Households' everyday food intake and consumption related food insecurity is a household problem of the ability to buy and consume an adequate quantity and quality of food and the poor households are locked into daily food deficits beyond those of seasonality. Before discussing what the studied households usually eat every day, it will be worthwhile to share some of my household observational experiences.

Case Observation: No side dish

It was 2 pm on 15 November, 2011. I was sitting in the yard observing the household activities of Armuj Hossain (58 Years), an agricultural and other wage labourer of Rowmari upazila of Kurigram District. The household head Armuj was present at home as he had no job because the Monga period had started. His wife, Rahela, told me that her husband needed to have lunch a bit earlier than the other members as he was taking a course of medicine for his back pain. His wife informed me that usually they take lunch after his elder son Sabuj came from his *kaj* (job). Shabuj (17 years old) worked as a part time rickshaw puller. I had a feeling that Rahela was intending to invite me to join with Armuj for lunch as she knew that I had seen what she had cooked that day. She did invite me. I cordially refused to participate as I knew that she cooked a very limited amount of rice and only one dish, *alu bharta* (mashed potato with salt and few drops of mustard oil), and not all of the members of that household took lunch. I requested Armuj to go inside and take his lunch, which he did. Approximately one hour later Sabuj returned from *kam*. This time Rahela and Sabuj came to me and cordially requested and caught my hand to take lunch with him. I couldn't refuse. I then went inside the house (a single room with a tin-made wall and tin roof, where all of the household members lived) and had a lunch with Shabuj – there was only rice with *alu bharta* (Photograph 6.3).



Photograph 6.3: The left photo shows the lunch menu of Armuj Hossain on the day of my observation consisting of only one side dish and the right hand photo shows my participation of eating lunch with his elder son.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

Case Observation: No alternatives and less eating

It was afternoon (February 10, 2012) at about 3 pm in a household of Alfaz Mondon (39 years old) - a van puller of Akaluganj Bazar in Nilphamari Sadar. My female research assistant and I were observing the household's activities. We did not see the preparation of any food up to that time. We observed that all the members ate *panta bhat* (cooked rice soaked in water overnight) with *alu bhorta* as a breakfast. Alfaz's wife Mamotaz informed us that these foods were left over from yesterday's dinner. She was waiting for her husband, who was due to bring rice and other foodstuffs from the market. The children asked her: 'Maa (mother) will you not cook lunch?' She replied: 'your father will bring food materials and then I will cook.' They were all waiting for Alfaz. After half an hour, Alfaz entered the house with only a small packet of rice (Photograph 6.5). He gave this packet to his wife and told her that he did get any passengers nor any goods to carry today. Then he tried to manage other work but he couldn't. His wife then went to cook the rice and see if anything was available to eat with rice. At last, she got some potatoes and started to cook potato curry (Photograph 6.4) which was then their lunch menu with rice of that day. As the amount of rice was not enough, both the husband and wife took less in order that their children would have a belly full. When we also observed that night they ate only puffed rice with *gur* (a local cheap sweet made from sugarcane juice).



Photograph 6.4: The left photo shows Momtaz cooking arrangement and her lunch menu.
Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

Case Observation: Repetitive menu

One evening (January 23, 2012) at about 7 pm in Kamal Hossain's (34 Years old agricultural wage labour) household in Sundarganj union, Gaibandha district. His pregnant wife Ayesha (26 Years) was giving dinner to their only daughter Laizu, who was nine years old. But Laizu was crying and strongly resisting the only food available - rice with *Kachu bhorta* (boiled arum leaves with salt and a bit of oil). I had observed in the morning that the wife had collected those *kachu* leaves from the wetlands near their home. Laizu was crying and crying. Her mother was becoming angry trying to force her to eat. But Laizu was doing the same. I then asked Laizu cordially why she was crying. She replied me that she did not like to eat this boiled *kachu* leaves daily. When I asked her mother whether there were other food available at home, she stood up and brought down one small plate from the rack which had *begun bhorta* (mashed boiled aubergine with salt, chilli and a few drops of mustard oil) in it. She said that she was keeping it for tomorrow's breakfast and if it was eaten at dinner nothing would be saved for breakfast. She also brought a small bowl full of starch that she kept on the stove to keep it hot and to use as substitute for dal. I then also tried to convince Laizu to

eat her dinner. I told Laizu that I like this food very much and I would also eat that food with her and if she took dinner then I would have my photo taken with all of them. Ayesha gave me some *kachu leaves* on an earthen bowl with a tin spoon. I ate some kachu leaves and after then to keep my promise to Laizu I take a picture will all of them (Photograph 6.5).



Photograph 6.5: The left photo shows my attempt to motivate Laizu to have her dinner by tasting the food cooked by her mother and the right photo shows me with the family.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

The above three observational experiences give a snapshot of households' everyday food intake. I found that poor households take a very limited number of meals (Table 6.3) at all seasons except for the farm households⁶⁸. Female-headed and wage-labour-based male-headed households hardly ever had three meals a day even in normal times. Usually they took two meals in a day but the farm households had three meals normally.

“I can manage a very little amount food once a day. If I eat, my children will not get a belly full food and they will be remain hungry and will cry. As a mother how I could bear it? It is better that I will take full belly of water and give all the food to my children.”

(Ambia Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, widowed, Akalugaj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

“We have to starve or eat very little in order to satisfy our children”

(Monzila Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, divorcee, Dhamur Char, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

⁶⁸ To know details about their everyday food basket, I asked the households in in-depth interviews to recall how many times they ate meals yesterday and what food items they ate each time. I also asked their daily meal numbers including what food they usually consume during the different times, i.e. during the Monga, in disasters (particularly during the flood) and on festival occasions. It was just recall of their usual situation in those periods. In every case I did not tell them to quantify the amount of food they eat rather it was open to share what realities exist within their everyday food basket. Along with the interviews of the household heads, I also carried out open conversations with other members within the households to explore their views about everyday food consumption.

Table 6.3: Households meal taken numbers in different situations.

Meals taking situation in different period				
	Normal	Monga	Disaster (Flood)	Festive day (Eid/Puja)
Woman-headed (Landless with no homestead land/ with homestead)	Two /hardly three	One/hardly two	Uncertain/depend on relief and own stock	Two/some years three
Male-headed (Agriculture /other wage labourer)	Two /hardly three	One/hardly two	Uncertain/depend on relief and own stock	Almost Three
Male-headed (Sharecropper/Marginal Farmer)	Three meals	Two /hardly three	One/hardly two/in severe case uncertain	Three
Male-headed (Small Farmer)	Three meals	Two /hardly three	One/hardly two/in severe case uncertain	Three

Source: Household interviews, October, 2011- March, 2012.

Households reported that food consumption has increased a little in recent times to some extent but they have food scarcity in terms of food intake throughout the year. The number of meals increases after the harvest period with a little diversification in the consumption of improved varieties. However, they suffer from a high level of food insecurity in the context of the number of meals they can take, including food items during the Monga. Most households take one or two meals (on average) a day, and certainly only one full meal a day. The food intake situation of farm households is also worst during Monga period (for detail, see the next section 6.3). At the time of disaster, particularly during the floods, all households suffer a lot in all spheres of livelihoods. If the flood is coupled with Monga their sufferings reach the highest level. During severe floods they have to move from own house to comparatively higher places like the main road, embankment or high rise union *parishad* building. This temporary disruption brings huge suffering in the cooking of food. Moreover, they have no food stocks. Households reported that eating anything becomes uncertain and they have to depend on the government and NGO-provided relief. Thus, limiting meals per day, skipping one or two meals or sometimes going to bed just having drunk water are indicators of food insecurity among the studied household across all of the villages.

I found very interesting information regarding food intake on festive days. Almost all households try to eat culturally important festive foods on the festive day. They also try to take

three meals on those days. They reported their eagerness to show smiling faces to all of the household members at least on these festive days. Farm households save some money for these occasions whereas others borrow money from rich neighbours or sell household assets to secure good food and clothes for the children and aged people. Moriom Begum of Kaliganj said:

“For the Eid days I get some food as charity from my landlord (employer). On Eid-ul-Azha (Eid for the sacrifice of cattle) I collect meat from the wealthier households of my village and then cook for my family and if I get enough then I preserve it by boiling with salt for the next few days.”
(Widow, interviewed on 14 February, 2012).

All of the studied households across all of the villages take an inadequate variety every day, mainly of the less nutritious foods. As I conducted interviews on a spread of dates during my fieldwork, answers to the 24 hour recall question show the overall scenario of food consumption (Table 6.4). Household menus are generally very narrow, with a low proportion of rich food. Their food baskets contain more or less the common food items all year round except in the crisis period of the Monga and on festive days. Besides, the incidence of their consumption is very similar across households. Most households rely on a basic subsistence diet of rice or potato cooked with salt. As additional food items, green leaves, vegetables and pulses mainly *Khasari* (as lentil is expensive) are the most important non-cereal foods. In recent times they have been consuming *ruti* (home-made small *chapati* like bread) made by grinding maize instead of rice as maize cultivation has increased in the most of the areas in northwest region and it is cheaper than rice. When resources are more plentiful, they consume additional vegetables and a small fish curry. Dried fish is common among the poor households. Protein foods like egg, milk and meat are taken very infrequently by the poor, even among the families who are engaged in their production or trade. Due to extreme resource constraints, women often attempt to minimize the costs associated with food preparation for instance by limiting the number of times they cook per day, and routinely the families consume leftovers of cold and stale food. In consequence households not only experience underfeeding, but also under-nutrition is rife. However, from the everyday food intake scenario (Table 6.4) it may assume how worse the situation of food intake during the Monga could be.

Table 6.4: One day scenarios of household food intake.

Households	Number of meals taken day before	Ate meals yesterday (with full belly)
Female-headed (Landless with no homestead land/ with homestead)	Amela Rowmari; 13 November, 2011	In the morning just take <i>muri</i> (puffed rice), <i>gur</i> Lunch (nearly 4 pm): <i>Khuder bhat</i> (broken bits of rice) and <i>Halenchha shak</i> (green leaves naturally grown nearby or at pond, wetlands etc.)
	Ambia Khatun Nilphamari Sadar; 2 January, 2012	Morning (nearly 7 am): <i>Bashi bhat</i> (left over rice) and <i>kachu Shak</i> (<i>arum leaves</i>) Noon (nearly 5 pm): Rice, <i>Lal shak</i> (green leaves)
	Marion Beguam Kaliganj; 14 February, 2012	Morning (nearly 7:30 am): <i>Bashi bhat</i> and <i>alu bharta</i> Lunch (nearly 2 pm): Rice, <i>soto maser jhol torkery</i> (small fish curry with aubergine) Evening (nearly 7 pm): Rice, <i>kopi bhaji</i> (fried cabbage) and <i>alu bharta</i> (<i>mashed potato</i>)
	Protima Dotto Rowmari; 21 November, 2011	Morning (nearly 7 am): <i>Muri</i> and <i>Payes</i> (a sort of dessert cooked with milk, rice and sugar) Lunch (nearly 4 pm): Rice, <i>Kumra bhaji</i> (fried pumpkin) and <i>kheshari dal</i>
	Monzila Khatun Gangachara; 17 February, 2012	Morning (nearly 8 am): <i>Chira</i> (Flattened rice) with banana Lunch (nearly 3 pm): Rice, <i>pata kopi bhaji</i> (fried cabbage) Evening (nearly 7 pm): Rice, <i>begun bharta</i> (mashed boiled Aubergine with oil, chilli and salt)
Male-headed (Agriculture /other wage labourer)	Abdul Hoq Sundorganj; 3 March, 2012	Morning (nearly 7: 30 am): <i>Panta bhat</i> with <i>kumra bhaji</i> Lunch (nearly 4 pm): Rice, <i>pape bhaji</i> (fried green papaya) and <i>khasari dal</i>
	Ayan Miah Nilphamari Sadar; 10 December, 2011	Morning (nearly 7 to 7:30 am) : Children ate <i>bhashi bhat</i> with gur and adults ate <i>bhasi bhat</i> with <i>alu bharta</i> Lunch (nearly 4 pm): Rice, <i>Kachki maser torkery</i> (very small fish curry) and <i>khashari dal</i>
	Armuj Hossain Rowmari; 19 November, 2011	In the morning (nearly 8 am) only <i>Muri</i> (puffed rice) and tea Lunch (nearly 4 pm: Rice, <i>pat shak</i> (small jute green leaves) and <i>alu bharta</i>

Households	Number of meals taken day before	Ate meals yesterday (with full belly)
Kosiron Sundorganj; 15 December, 2011	Three meals	Morning (nearly 8 am): <i>Ruti</i> (home-made white small bread) and <i>alu bhaji</i> (potato fry)
		Lunch (nearly 2:30 pm) : Rice, <i>kach kala bharta</i> (mashed boiled green banana with oil, salt and chilli) and <i>silver carp macher torkery</i> (carp fish curry)
		Evening (nearly 7 pm): Rice and <i>silver carp macher torkery</i> (carp fish curry)
Hares Ali Kaliganj; 12 March, 2012	Two meals	Morning (nearly 7 am): <i>Panta bhat</i> and <i>dal bharta</i> (mashed khasari dal, oil, salt and chilli)
		Lunch (nearly 4 to 430 pm): Rice, <i>sutki bhorta</i> (mashed dry fish with oil, salt and chilli) and <i>mug dal</i>
		Morning (nearly 8 to 8:30 am): <i>Khituri</i> (cooked together of rice, dal, spices and oil)
Aiyub Ali Gangachara; 29 January, 2012	Three meals	Lunch (nearly 3 pm): Rice, <i>goru bhuna</i> (beef curry) and dal
		Night: Rice and left over <i>goru bhuna</i>
Male-headed (Sharecropper/Marginal Farmer) Bashir Hossain Nilphamari Sadar; 10 November, 2011	Two meals	Morning: Muri (puffed rice) with left over jhol (curry)
		Lunch: Rice, <i>napa shak (green leaves)</i> and <i>keshari dal</i>
Jaynal Bapari Gangachara; 23 February, 2012	Three meals	Morning (nearly 7:30 am): Rice and <i>alu bhaji</i>
		Lunch (nearly 2:30 pm) : Rice, <i>dharosh bhaji</i> (Okra fry) and <i>green tomato with small fish curry</i>
		Evening (nearly 7 pm): Rice and left over curry
Male-headed (Small Farmer) Amzad Miah Sundarganj; 27 December, 2011	Three meals	Morning (nearly 7:30 am): <i>Ruti</i> and <i>alu bhaji</i> (fried potato); children took egg
		Lunch (nearly 2:30 pm) : Rice, <i>ful copi bhaji</i> (fried cauliflower) and <i>Telapia macher torkery</i> (carp fish curry with potato and aubergine)
		Evening (nearly 7 pm): Rice and left over <i>Telapia carp macher torkery</i>

Source: Household interviews, October, 2011 - March, 2012.

6.2.5 Intra-household food distribution

Beginning with Amartya Sen's term "missing women" in 1990, the literature suggests that a particularly strong anti-female bias at lower income levels in South Asia (Ravallion and Wodon, 2000) poses a distortion to the household allocation of food. Van Esterik (1985) is noteworthy to mention here in this regard: "there is sufficient evidence to say that food is not equally divided within households ... the distribution of food reflects the order of precedence and social value of the food consumers." This trend is also not new in rural Bangladesh⁶⁹. There is a strong tradition that women eat least and last, often ends up being the shock absorbers of household food security, and reducing their own consumption to leave more food for other household members. I also observed disparity between men and women in food intake within the household. Women reported that they are interested to feed others but in their own feeding are ignored by themselves as well as their husbands. Even before the crisis, women of the male-household headed reported that they skip meals more often than men.

"I have to starve or eat a little and have to depend on whether there is anything left. I do not worry. It is women's fate."

(Rahima Anjuma, female, wife of Bashir Hossain, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, conversation held on 10 November, 2011)

"I cannot cook a sufficient amount of food for my family. If I eat first, my children and husband will have to eat less. It is painful for me. So how do I eat first?"

(Hasina Begum, female, wife of Hares Ali, Dakhshin Char, Kaliganj, conversation held on 12 March, 2012)

Women still believe that men work hard, so they have to eat more food. That is why they give top priority to their husband and then children in food distribution. But if there is any old member present like the mother or father of the household head, this person is given more food and nutritious food. But they leave this food for their grandson and granddaughter. Even women working in wage labour activities take less food within their family. Other factors like limited income, certain periods of unemployment of the household head, and higher food prices increase the burden for women who must extend their limited food budget even further. However, the food consumption of women also varies depending on whether women are in a

⁶⁹ Gender differences in household food allocation have been observed in diverse locales in Bangladesh (Chen, *et al.*, 1981) and preference in food allocation for adult males has been widely reported by many researchers (see, Pitt *et al.*, 1990; Tetens *et al.*, 2003; Gittelsohn, 1989; Levinson, 1974; Chaudhary, 1983; Abdullah and Wheeler, 1985). Much of the available evidence is based on either nutritional status data and/or health outcome data, which show higher rates of morbidity and mortality in females (Nabarro, 1984; Koenig, and D'Souza, 1986; Carloni, 1981; Den Hartog, 1972) or by inference from stated beliefs and reported behaviour (Gittelsohn, *et al.*, 1997). Within the household, women suffer more food insecurity hunger and malnutrition than male members. Elsewhere, a number of researchers have also attempted to explain why some household members are shown preference and others disfavoured, as well as the economic, environmental and socio-cultural determinants of food allocation patterns (Gopalan, 1975; Gittelsohn, 1991; Rogers and Schlossman, 1990). However, intra-household food allocation is significantly considered as an indicator of household food security.

joint family, and whether there is a single earner or multiple earners in the household, and whether women have their own resources and earnings, in addition to the husband's occupational status.

Women believe that the custom of women taking food after all the household members have taken their share is seriously affecting women's adequate nutrient intake, particularly because pregnant and lactating mothers are more vulnerable due to less food intake. Though women are now well aware of their nutritional needs during this period, even knowing the facts they are unable to effect any significant changes in consumption behaviour in order to address their special needs. While staple food items, such as rice and *dal* are distributed fairly equally or women prefer to eat according to their need even after distributing to the other members, the main or rich dishes usually containing more nutrition are frequently allocated preferentially by giving priority to other household members, including adult males and both son and daughter. Sometimes in male-headed households, the males are not only interested to know what women eat but also expressed their dominance that they have the right to eat more as they are the main bread winner. One participant in the FGD in Rowmari (24 November, 2011) said "When my husband gets angry, he says do you earn that you want to eat more? If you earn like me, then eat." But there were opposite statements I found from men:

"I never tell my wife eat later or to take less food. But she prefers not to eat with us. I know it is mainly to satisfy us to take a meal with a full belly."
(Amzad Miah, male, small farmer, Aleker *Char*, Sundarganj, interviewed on 27 December, 2011)

Though women in the FGD sessions mostly reported that they now eat with their family members, I observed that they still follow the tradition of eating later, usually half to one hour, even two hours and take less quantity of food. Thus, the lack of sufficient food adequacy and proper nutrition, even a short-term, can affect their health and nutritional status seriously and the future health and productivity of their children.

Though earlier cross-sectional studies suggest the favouring of male children over female children in intra-household food allocation (see, Chen *et al.*, 1981; Sawyer *et al.*, 1982), I found this practice is not common, with some exceptions. Though parents still consider their sons as a source of future security in their old age, however, the old priority of giving more foods to sons than daughters is nowadays not so prominent. One woman participant in a FGD in Rowmari said: "I consider my son and daughter equal. I give them the same food what I can manage. My husband also has the same attitude towards our son and daughter" (24 November, 2011). Usually sons and daughters are served together and given the same food items. Thus, girls' food insecurity within households is becoming less in the villages. But most of the

women participants in the FGD sessions mentioned that in times of food scarcity particularly during the Monga, or the disaster time, age differentials favouring children of both genders over adolescents are still practised in terms of food distribution. This indicates a need to continue the current efforts of GO and NGOs to improve the nutritional status of women and girl children at the household level.

6.3 Characterisation of household food insecurity during the Monga

It is well documented that the foremost outcomes of the Monga are essentially the diminution of the household's access to food, its proper utilization, and the creation of an unstable food supply so that poor households face severe food deprivation and a hunger situation. In characterisation of household seasonal food insecurity, the universally common representation is not having enough food at present and fears for the future (Hamelin, Beadry, and Habicht, 2002: 129), but during the Monga we find more exasperating descriptions, as eloquently put forward by Hey (2002: 21):

“... it is not only simply hunger or starvation but the whole amount of wrenching feelings including anxiety, fear, suffering, pain and despair. The Monga embodies both body and spirit of the victims in their symbiotic relationship. In the extreme, it renders men, women and children into less than human beings, harking back into their primeval state when the mind is concentrated on sheer survival. It is the abject degradation of the human soul, reducing life to its lowest common degradation which makes the Monga so abominable.”

However, as stated earlier that most of the studies on seasonal food insecurity in the Monga-prone areas have tended to be at the regional and district level and quantitative in nature (see, Khandker, 2009; Khalily and Latif, 2010; Khandker and Mahmud, 2012; RDRS, 2006; WFP, 2005). I would argue here that these indicator-based (i.e. calori intake) quantitative analyses have not directly assessed subjective aspects of the hunger experience of Monga-affected households who are affected on a regular basis (Wolfe, and Frongillo, 2001). On the other hand, after Sen, the search for measures of access failure using the qualitative approach (see, Coates *et al.*, 2006a; Frongillo *et al.*, 2003; Hamelin, Beadry and Habicht, 2002; Studdert, Frongillo and Valois, 2001; Radimer *et al.*, 1992; Wolfe *et al.*, 1996; Wolfe *et al.*, 1998; Wolfe, Frongillo, and Valois, 2003) has focused increasingly on household behaviours that are known to reflect not only increased severity in food stresses but also the actual experience of becoming hungry (Webb *et al.*, 2006a). I thus further would say that looking at how the household food insecurity and hunger manifests itself should include a broad range of non-food sufferings during the Monga because this may provide interlocking vulnerability to seasonal hunger (Dercon, 2002).

According to the households' descriptions, the core characteristics of their food insecurity and hunger experiences during the Monga revolve broadly around three dimensions: they frequently cut back on both food quantity (i.e. caloric intake) and quality (for example, dietary diversity) and, they experience psychological suffering⁷⁰ (Table 6.5). Though earlier studies conducted both in developed and developing countries found that in food insecurity quality is often experienced first, followed by food quantity (Frongillo *et al.*, 2003; Maxwell, 1996; Quandt *et al.*, 2006; Radimer *et al.*, 1992; Radimer, Olson and Campbell, 1990; Studdert, Frongillo and Valois, 2001), here I found a more complex and cross-cutting situation, without specific phases. All of these manifestations occurred within the context of their overall food provisioning activities during the Monga.

Table 6.5: Core characteristics of household's food insecurity situation during the Monga.

Characteristics of household food insecurity		
Quantitative dimension	Qualitative dimension	Psychological dimension
Reduce number of meals eaten in a day	Lack of access to food items from market	Anxiety
Insufficient quantity of food	Unsuitability of food and diet	Embarrassment and shame
Skipping meals by adults	Modification of eating patterns/ Repetitiveness of menu	Distress
	Consuming whatever food is available around the house	Uncertainty whether can eat next meal
	Constrained in cooking and getting clean water	Fear of food deprivation in upcoming season
	Favouring certain household members over others	Loss of dignity
	Diminishing of children's food intake	Less control over situation

Source: Household interviews and FGD sessions, 2011 -2012.

6.3.1 Qualitative dimension

The lack of access to food is the beginning situation of the Monga which continues the whole season over an extended period. It manifests itself through access to fewer food items from the

⁷⁰ In line with the earlier research (Wolfe and Frongillo, 2001; Radimer, et.al, 1992; Wolfe, et.al, 1998), Frongillo *et al.* (2003), developed a naturalistic semi-structured interview guide to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of household food insecurity in rural Bangladesh in diverse situations, but the psychological aspects of food insecurity did not emerge in their study. In my view their research did not adequately consider the seasonal time frame and also spatiality. However, Coates *et al.* (2006b) in their study of Bangladesh clearly identified a preoccupation among respondents about where their food would come from.

market as purchasing power becomes nil for the affected households even the prices of essential perishable food items remain the same or sometimes fall with some small variations during the Monga period.

“Everything is available in the market at the same price. But we can’t buy.”
(Monzila Khatun, female, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

“What is the benefit of hiking prices? Who will buy? Sellers know that when the Monga exists, we do not have the money to buy. Rather, if possible, they reduce the price to attract us to buy. But we can’t.”
(Abdul Hoq, male, van puller/ wage labour, Aleker Char, Sundarganj, interviewed on 3 March, 2012)

Similar observations are found in the RDRS’s survey results.⁷¹ They found that there were no significant fluctuations in the month-wise prices of key food items and daily necessities during the Monga period (RDRS, 2006a). In some years the prices of food and non-food items increase, not necessarily during the Monga but when there is a widespread flood, artificially creating food shortages, or during political instability/unrest, e.g. *Hartal* (political strikes). Giving an example of such a situation, Alauddin Ali said:

“In 2008, a severe situation was created during the Monga as the prices of all food and non-food items including rice were too high compared to other years. This fast escalation of prices did not happen only in the northern districts; it was a nationwide problem. I saw that the male members of many farming households were forced to migrate to other districts leaving their standing *Aman* crops unsupervised, and their wives were standing in the queue for government relief; usually this does not happen.”
(Executive Director, Udayankur Seba Sangstha, interviewed, Nilphamari, 2012)

Due to lack of cash, people are forced to get food from other sources like borrowing, relief and begging and other coping strategies (see, next chapter for details). Less purchasing capacity pushes the affected households to consume foods that would normally be considered inedible (Table 6.6). They have no choice but to eat anything available to meet their hunger and somehow cling to life. Zug (2006:34) described this situation:

“... the quality of food is also being reduced in various ways. People stop buying comparatively expensive items for their meals. They consume less milk, eggs and vegetables. Meat is out of reach for most of the rural poor even during good times. People reduce the quality of their foods and buy unclean broken rice (*khud*) which is about 25 percent cheaper on the local market.”

Households reported that they try to eat rice at least once a day with whatever they can arrange. In the normal times those foods which they usually do not take during the Monga they do not

⁷¹ This survey was carried out in 2006 comparing the prices of rice, flour, lentil, soybean oil, kerosene, and diesel for the years 2004 and 2005.

hesitate to eat, for example, *Bhater marh* (left over liquid when rice is cooked; normally kept aside for feeding livestock). Most problems are faced by the children. They do not like to eat such odd foods. Sometimes they replace rice with root crops like sweet potatoes, which is seen as a “*garib manusher khaddo* (poor man’s food). Thus, foods acquired by households do not correspond to what household members want to eat and do not allow them to have a complete and satisfying meal. Instead the household goal is merely to postpone hunger and survive.

Table 6.6: Some coping/alternative food items consumed during the Monga period.

Some coping foods
<i>Bhater marh</i> (left over liquid when cooked rice)
<i>Khud</i> (broken rice; cheaper than rice)
<i>Khichuri</i> (cooked combination of rice, dal, spices, oil and salt)
<i>Bhusi</i> (Brar of maize and wheat)
<i>Dheki shak</i> (green leaves)
<i>Jongli lataapata</i> (wild greens like chamgash)
<i>Pat pata</i> (jute leaves)
<i>Gacher mul</i> (root of tree)
<i>Lata gulmo</i> (slender creeper)
<i>Kachu ghechu</i> (arum greens and roots)
<i>Kolar Mocha</i> (skin of the cone of banana)
<i>Kolar thorh</i> (spathe of banana)
<i>Shapla ful o shapla lata</i> (stem of water lily)
<i>Sukna Misti alur turka</i> (dry sweet potato pieces)
<i>Pelka and sholka</i> (mixed vegetables, like kachu and jute leaves)
<i>Shamuk and Gougale</i> (snail; consumed mainly by Hindu people)
<i>Kossop</i> (tortoise); eaten mainly by Hindus

Source: Household interviews, October, 2011- March, 2012

With the help of NGOs, many poor households now are cultivating *mach-alu*, a traditional crop (Photograph 6.6) that is a possible solution being an alternative for other vegetables and even rice during this time. But this practice is not yet widespread. Households of the *char* villages mentioned that due to their soil being poor sandy loams they cannot cultivate root crops. Besides, households



Photograph 6.6: Freshly harvested ‘Mach Alu’ (also known as vine potato or fish yam)

Source: www.flickr.com/photos/communityledtotalsanitation

reported that the situation is worse in the female-headed households. One day (13 November, 2011) when the Monga season was continuing in the villages, at a female headed household in

Rowmari of Kurigram district, I found a very disheartening scenario of gathering food in unacceptable way.⁷² My experience is presented below:

When I went to Amela's house to take her interview, I saw that some *polao* (a famous dish of specially cooked rice) was drying on a tin at a side of the front yard [photograph 6.7]. During the interview, at a suitable moment, I asked her the reason of drying *polao* on the yard. At first, she felt shy giving me the answer. But due to my friendly attitude, she became free to speak and tell the reason. She told that this food she collected from *Majhi bari* (a rich neighbour house within two miles of her house) five days ago. She attended in *jiafot* (a post funeral programme, arranged after few days of a person's death) where some good food (according to the cultural norms) has to serve guests who come for *doa* (special prayers for the eternal peace of the dead person).



Photograph 6.7: Collected *polao* was drying up under the sunlight.
Source: Fieldwork, 2011-2012.

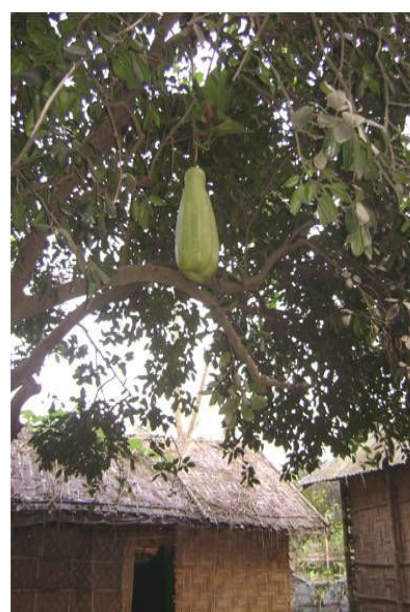
Amela told me that she had not been invited there. But like Amela, many poor go to such events because as a tradition there is always a side arrangement for the poor, beggars and destitute women for giving a belly full meal. Moriom went along with her young son and daughter. Her children ate their belly full but she took her food by a polythene bag. She said that it's frowned upon to bring food home; rather, you are allowed to eat as much as you can when you are there. She told that when the arranger of the programme gave her food, she did not eat, at a suitable moment she just put all the food into a pre-arranged polythene bag which she hid inside her clothing. She told that it is very tricky and risky because if the host see this, they would not give her food a second time. She also mentioned that it wasn't only her doing this; other poor people did the same. Sometimes, her children also do but it depends on the occasion. However, after bringing the food home she dried it under the sun on a tin sheet as this is the most convenient way of preserving food for at least a week. She said that she follows a strategy to make it edible. Before serving, she re-cooks it by adding some oil and water. She said: "it is very disgraceful for me to follow such an unacceptable way of acquiring food, but I am bound, as it reduces my pangs of feeling of hungry and keeps me free at least for some days from the uncertainty of not having food at home at all".

⁷² Anderson (1990) suggested that "... to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways refers to acquisition without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing and other coping strategies." Thus, unacceptable ways indicate all these means of food acquisition.

Households having homestead gardens mentioned that during the Monga theft of their homestead garden vegetables like *Papua*, ladies finger, chilli, pumpkin, water melon or green leaves increases. Stealing includes chickens, fruits, and household items. They adopt various strategies (see, an example on Photograph 6.8) to protect their vegetables and household belongings but sometimes they don't work. While I was discussing this issue in a FGD session with men in Rowmari (24 November, 2011) one participant said:

“What are the poor supposed to do? When day after day hunger enfolds them, and they do not get any way to manage food, then they don't any more realise what is ethical and what is unethical!”
(Kamal, male, 41 years old)

In fact, the hardships of the poor in food provisioning often go beyond their control so that they are forced to follow ‘immoral’ ways, because searching for food always gets preference over anything. Participants mentioned that no-one wants to practise such socially unacceptable means of food acquisition; rather, they alluded to it as one form of their “powerlessness” in feeding their family with an insufficient income. However, not only do households have to eat unacceptable food during this time but also they eat the same item at every meal they have in a day what we saw in the earlier section. The monotony of meals is a major concern for everyone. For example, “the Monga is the time when the same food always comes back day after day” (Monzila Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, divorcee, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012). It is reflected in the lack of intra-meal and inter-meal variety.



Photograph 6.8: For protecting homestead cultivated sweet water melon from stealing, household used the big tree for their branching and production.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March. 2012.

Children suffer most from such a poor and monotonous diet. Most of the children (of different ages) told me that they did not like to eat the food that their mothers provided. One boy named Bablu (13 years old) expressed his feelings just saying: “Rice is ok, but eating potato or arum every day is disgusting!” and one girl Rina (11 years old) said: “I don't know when I can eat beef or chicken”. Most of the household heads said that taking the same poor foods every day seriously affected the children's behaviour. Sometimes they resisted eating such food and

were rude to their parents. Though the tendency is less prominent in normal times (as we have seen in an earlier section), during the Monga the sufficiency of food intake varies among the household members, particularly women and girls compared to men and boys respectively as reported by the households.

The *char* households reported that when the Monga is accompanied by a prolonged or late flood, there are problems in cooking food due to the lack of firewood as most of the low lying *char* areas are inundated. As the cooking is dependent on collected firewood or dry leaves, it is obstructed. Another difficulty associated with flooding is getting safe and clean drinking water as the tube wells are submerged under the water⁷³. Mainland households can fetch water by travelling a distance to tube wells that are not flooded, but the problem is acute for the *char* dwellers.

“During the floods our life becomes very excruciating due to a lack of safe drinking water. Sometimes we even use flood water to meet our needs. Moving to the embankment or any suitable place in the mainland is the only way to get safe drinking water.”

(Hares Ali, 51 years, male, agricultural wage labour, Dakhshin Char, interviewed on 12 March, 2012)

Sanitation facilities have traditionally been poor in the *char* areas compared to the mainland villages, which accelerates to a high rate of the diarrhoea among both adults and children (Neogi, 2009). Households reported a number of diseases associated with the Monga. Ayan Miah of Nilphamari Sadar (interviewed on 10 December, 2011) pointed this out by saying that “we suffer from diarrhoea by drinking unsafe water and eating wild vegetables like *shapla ful* (stem of water lily)”. Earlier, Rashid *et al.* (2006) reported that illness is another major crisis that the households suffer most (Rashid *et al.* 2006). Elahi and Ara (2008) indicated that a number of diseases are associated with the Monga, particularly those related to malnutrition (see, Box 6.1). Taking data from a field level report based on a local weekly newspaper of the Rangpur district named the *Atal*, they showed that in October, 1991, about 50,706 people were affected by malnutrition-induced diarrhoea in greater Rangpur (Photograph 6.9).

⁷³ In Bangladesh most tube wells were installed under various government initiatives (mainly Union *Parishad*) and those of the NGOs and private sector, but they did not consider flood levels. So the flooding of the tube well in the monsoon season is a nationwide problem and 70%-80% of tube wells are inundated almost every year (Practical Action, no date).

Box 6.1: Morbidity conditions in the Monga-prone Areas

- Chronic malnutrition
- Diarrhoea
- Anaemia
- Fever
- Abortion (mainly due to malnutrition)
- Premature birth
- Neo-natal mortality
- Peri-natal mortality
- Starvation

Source: adopted from Elahi and Ara, 2008.

Elsewhere, Lipton (1983) argued that poor who usually consumed less than an average kcal (2,200) per day in normal periods have a greater possibility of suffering from seasonality owing to their intake decline. Earlier, a related research finding in Matlab, Bangladesh also indicated the same that “landless mothers showed both lower average dietary energy intake and greater seasonal fluctuation than did mothers with land” (Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey 1981: 59). Most of the households reported that one or more members of their respective households had been affected by diarrhoea and fever during the last Monga season. But medicines and treatment costs for these diseases use up cash that could be spent buying food or for other purposes. The impacts on health have consequent effects on the regular activities of the households, including people’s livelihood activities.



Photograph 6.9: A woman showing the condition of her hunger stricken grandchild.

Source: www.hrcbm.org/news/monga_nifamari_11-02-05.html accessed on 16 March, 2011.

A Benchmark study conducted by the Monga Mukto Bangladesh (MMB) secretariat⁷⁴ says that during the Monga period malnutrition means that 37 percent of the poor lose some of their

⁷⁴ In August 2007, a group of leading economists of Bangladesh in collaboration with the Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) and the ActionAid formed the Monga Mukto Bangladesh (Monga Free Bangladesh)

working capacity (Ganguly, 2009). Even after the crisis period, their health situation does not improve much. Malnutrition-related illness among the food insecure poor during the Monga season has consistently been a concern, contributing to the reduction of productivity and lost working days. Women also reported that the lack of regular work during this season is often exacerbated by increased morbidity among children. They often have to forego wage work in order to look after their sick children and so lose income when they need it most and therefore it becomes a downward spiral.

6.3.2 Quantitative dimension

In Table 6.3 it was documented that the households' usual number of meals fell significantly during the Monga. Curtailing the number of meals is common in all households. Most of the households take only one or two meals per day as we saw in an earlier section.

“We have less food and less meals per day.”
(Kosiron, female, housewife, Sundorganj, interviewed on 15 December, 2011)

“You may not know that the Monga is running. I have no *kam* (job). All day I search from *bari* (house) to *bari*, particularly at the rich houses. Sometimes I get help and sometimes I don't. Managing even one meal is difficult.”
(Amela, female; no fixed job, divorcee, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 13 November, 2011)

Research conducted by RDRS (2006a) showed that about 26 percent of households in greater Rangpur struggled to have even one meal for four to seven days a week during the Monga. Similarly, using the Bangladesh Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) data 2005, Khandker and Mahmud (2012) showed that about 58.8 percent of their sample households in the Rangpur were subjected to a perpetual shortfall in food consumption during the Monga and they also experienced food deprivation in the non-Monga seasons.

Skipping meals is a prominent coping strategy during this time reported by all of the households. Mostly they said that adults, particularly the women, skip their meals willingly to save foods for their next meal or their children. Sometimes households eat twice by dividing that one meal into three. Eating once a day usually means only rice, not other things like fish, meat, or costly vegetables. Sometimes they eat vegetables, but these are not from the market. “My neighbour Shopna's Husband cultivated a plot of *lal shak*. I helped him yesterday to pick up *lal shak* from the field which he sold yesterday at the hat. He gave me some *lal shak* as a wage which I have cooked today as the main menu for lunch” (Ambia Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, widowed, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 21 November, 2011).

Secretariat in Dhaka to study Monga-related poverty and to monitor activities in the five Monga-affected districts (Gaibandha, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Kurigram and Lalmonirhat) of Northern Bangladesh.

Vegetables like potato, aubergine, pumpkin and arum are consumed by all the households almost all the season and this is a good source of nutrition for the poor. But these vegetables are not harvested in this season except some early varieties. Vegetable prices are lowest from January until the end of the little Monga in April as this is the high season of winter vegetables. The prices steadily increase until October and remain high in November before they strongly decrease in December. In their base line survey report, the Institute of Microfinance (2006)⁷⁵ showed that among the survey households, the incidence of starvation such as skipping meals from time to time increased from 10 per cent in the non-Monga seasons to a staggering 50 per cent in the Monga period. Likewise, nearly half of the households had to take only half meals in both the Monga and non-Monga periods. The households that undergo starvation during the Monga are also likely to experience food deprivation to some extent, though in a milder form, in the non-Monga seasons. And those that are exposed to starvation during a Monga season expect to suffer hardship in the next Monga season as well. Khandker (2012) showed that the calorie consumption of the Monga region is not only less than rest of Bangladesh in the Monga season but also the other seasons (Figure 6.1)

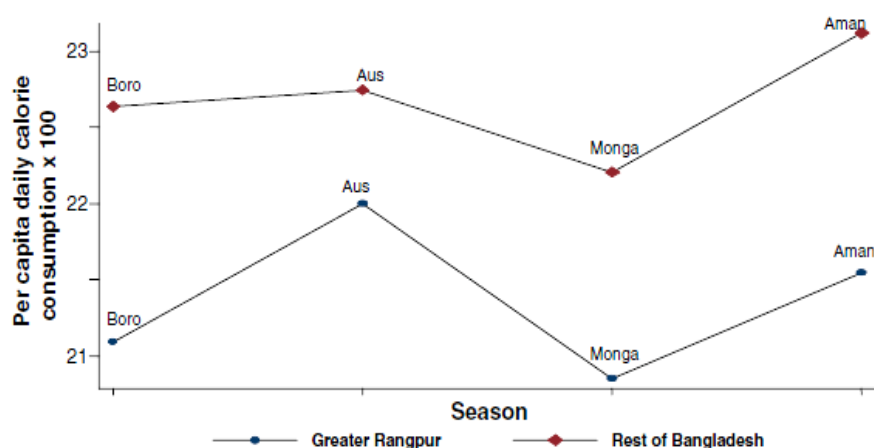


Figure 6.1: Caloric consumption comparison between Monga Region and rest of the Bangladesh by season in 2005.

Source: Adopted from Khandker, 2012.

6.3.3 Psychological dimension

After a content analysis of household statements, seven potential areas of psychological suffering are identified in table 6.5. The absence of nutritious and healthy foods day after day during the Monga season, in a context of competing average food needs, impacted the household members psychologically and nourished their feeling of deprivation. Women and

⁷⁵ This baseline survey covered nearly half a million poor households in the Rangpur region aimed to provide information for analyzing the phenomenon of Monga in the region. Both the extent and the seasonality of hunger become strikingly evident from the survey findings. See, Khandker and Mahmud, 2012 for detail.

female-headed households fared the worst, partly because there is already a greater likelihood of them being undernourished and partly because of discrimination.

“When the Monga season comes near, I feel a hidden fear in my mind by thinking of the struggles ahead for managing food for my family.”

(Monzila Khatun, female, female, maid/wage labour, divorcee, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

“I know it is his [God’s] will whether we eat or not and what we eat. But I pass every day under great uncertainty and mental pressure.”

(Ambia Khatun, female, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

This is supported by Tarasuk and Maclean’s (1990) view that “having to eat a diet that is perceived as substandard contributes to an overall sense of impoverishment” (Hamelin, Beaudry and Habicht, 2002). All of the households mentioned anxiety about food shortages in their own households. Research elsewhere also suggested that anxiety about the household food supply typically occurs first, followed by compromises in the quality and then quantity of food intakes, possibly accompanied by a more general deterioration in the quality of the whole household’s diet (<http://www.toronto.ca/health/children/pdf>). Psychological manifestations associated with a lack of access to food leads to a conspicuous feeling of hunger, as well as creating huge stress in the home. Feelings of uncertainty about arranging the next day’s meals are the main preoccupation of most households. They also worry about balancing their demand for food with their other basic non-food needs. Stresses were pointed up by a range of reactions from decreased interest in food and nourishment like “not to eat same food again and again”, “I can bear the pain of hunger but I feel sorrow about my children”. One woman participant in a FGD session at Lalmonirhant (11 February, 2012) said: “in the whole Monga season, I am in fear that I might not be able to protect my children from starving.” Relentless repetitiveness of meals carries a feeling of restriction and their worries are also intense from a fear for food deprivation in the upcoming season. This was mostly narrated by the female-headed households mentioning their difficulty in overcoming the problems of debt and returning to a normal situation.

“I don’t escape from the Monga even after the Monga season. I have been submerged under a huge loan during the Monga. I promised all from whom I took the money loan that I will repay their money when I get a job. Now I am trying hard to repay their loan, but my income is not sufficient to repay all of the money, even in small instalments, and pay the household’s other costs at the same time. Sometimes I hide myself on the scheduled day of repaying when I can’t manage the money. What unpleasant and fearful feelings I’ve had! No change has occurred indeed. I am now confined with the same condition as it was during the Monga!”

(Monzila Khatun, female, maid/wage labour, divorcee, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

This situation illustrates the internal cycle of poverty in the study villages. Thus, psychological sufferings intensify the feeling of exclusion and to the *Char* households it is a time to feel isolation from the society and feel fear of losing control.

“During the floods we sometimes get some food through relief from different sources. But during the Monga no-one comes to help us by giving any food.
(Amzad Miah, male, small farmer, Aleker *Char*, Sundarganj, interviewed on 27 December, 2011)

It is prevalent that households cannot stay inexpressive in the face of these aspects of food insecurity; they react and interact in different ways by any means (Hamelin, Beadry, and Habicht, 2002). Sometimes their adopted strategies adversely affect their social position and they lose their social dignity. Farming households who can afford to run more or less moderate food consumption in normal times are sometimes embarrassed by their vulnerability during the Monga and have to engage in unexpected income earning sources, which lowers their self-respect.

“Last year, I spent most of my savings on my daughter’s wedding just two months before the *Ashwin* month. It was arranged at short notice. When the Monga started, due to lack of cash my household situation became so bad that my wife was forced to work as a maid and I pulled a van. All of the people in my village know me as a farmer, and my ancestors were too. It was humiliating to me and my family. We are all counting the days to when our misery will end.”
(Joynal Bapari, male, marginal farmer, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 23 February, 2012)

Thus, the poor vulnerable people through changing their occupations often encounter problems with family or household status that they had enjoyed so long in their original *samaj* (village social system). I also found that the psychological suffering due to food insecurity throughout the Monga also has corollary at the “social” level. Elahi and Ara (2008) also pointed out that one outcome of the Monga is a loosening of family bonds, with negative consequences for social security and social status. In a women’s FGD session at Rowmari (24 November, 2011), one participant pointed out that quarrels between husband and wife are common during the Monga. In severe cases husbands hit their wives that seriously affect them mentally and physically. The extent of violence against women sometimes also results in divorce or separation. Other types of social violence like child marriage, the trafficking of young women and young girls, prostitution, polygamy and polyandry (Ali, 2006b; Guha, 2010; Elahi and Ara, 2008; Sultana, 2010) have also been reported. The squatter people usually live on the embankment where the social norms and customs are missing. Due to lack of social norms and customs one kind of cultural poverty exists and people are brought up in a very weak bondage (Guha, 2010: 324). Local people of Rowmair informed that the open border area with the Inida

tends to trafficking at large, and in the name of migration women and children are trafficked. Thus, in the absence of social norms and customs a kind of cultural poverty exists and people exist in a very weak system of bonds.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on households' struggles to secure their everyday food and what they can manage to eat both in normal times and also during the Monga. The time allocation in directly productive activities only indicates very limited income opportunities in all the villages. This is the recognition that agriculture is unlikely to deliver a sustainable livelihood, yet most households that remain in the village continue in the agricultural sector because of a perceived lack of alternatives. Although household wealth and opportunities shaped the choice of livelihood activities that are being pursued and by which they try to make a buffer against everyday stresses, life nonetheless remains challenging and is in constant flux. The burden of managing food means a dismally low level of consumption of foods and most households live at a level of substantial deprivation. Extreme market-dependence for all foods including the staples becomes extremely limited due to not having sufficient income and resources; thereby the level of food consumption *per se* falls. It is a phenomenon that households at risk of under-nutrition tend to be at greatest risk, relative to their requirements, in this season. The direct nutritional risk is intensified by the greater tendency of the affected poorest to be exposed to covariant and relatively severe fluctuations in employment and wage rates (Lipton, 1983). Households as a whole become impoverished and thus become vulnerable to starvation. It also suggests that when access to food from the principal food system declines substantially, food from the secondary system (i.e. CPRs, coping foods) comes to the rescue of the hungry. The affected households do have their traditional as well as assisted coping mechanisms, but the coping capacities of the vulnerable groups often go beyond the level of the stress. Generally, coping strategies differ from everyday livelihood strategies being means of risk management, e.g. income smoothing and consumption smoothing. The former attempts to reduce the *ex ante* risk impact, whereas, the latter strategies deal with the *ex post* consequences of risk (Mjonono, Ngidi and Hendriks, 2009: 315). I would argue here that in regions that face repeated shocks, coping strategies may come to be integrated into the routine set of daily livelihood activities (Baro and Deubel, 2006). But unluckily, pursuing such activities over many years has depleted people's resources and reduced their ability to recover from social and political stresses that result from chronic food insecurity. These are all directed into acquiring food or livelihood needs that are critical determinants of overall food and livelihood security (Davies, 1996: 175). The following chapter thus explores household coping responses during the Monga.

Chapter Seven

Coping and Adaptive Entitlements: Household Responses to the Monga

7.1 Introduction

The increasing interest in coping strategies of low income and food insecure households (World Bank, 1986; Moos, 1986) has led to the development of household level indicators relating to both the onset and to the manifestations of food insecurity (Kabeer, 1990). Earlier, Messer (1989) made the point, as a corollary, that understanding means of coping with food insecurity can help us to understand longer-term adaptations to more permanent dearth, and also predict which mechanisms of adaptation will be short-lived and which will be sustainable under programmes of economic development.

In the previous chapter we saw that during the Monga households face natural calamities, socio-economic crises and consumption constraints that can lead to chronic and often sustained asset, income and consumption loss (Rahman, 2002). Conroy and Marks (2008: 4) argue that these constraints during the Monga test the households coping/resilience strategies to the extreme. Khandker and Mahmud (2012: 78) showed that more than 30 percent of the Monga-affected poor households did not, or could not adopt any coping which suggests that they probably did not have access to any coping mechanism, or the coping options available to them were likely to be only erosive ones that undermine their future livelihood. These households are often prepared to endure a considerable degree of hunger before resorting to such desperate measures (de Waal, 1989). Devereux (1999) argues that if people who are already malnourished are cutting their food consumption to one meal a day – as many poor households routinely do – in what sense can they be said to be ‘coping’? However, research elsewhere showed that households themselves are adaptive, flexible social groups; certainly they actively respond to a variety of situations (Anderson and Woodrow, 1989) and it has been shown that households in more marginal environments are probably much better equipped to cope with periods of food stress than those accustomed to more secure conditions (Reardon and Matlon, 1989). Crucial to this discussion are both the variable resources they control and the severity of the risk that they experience (Amare, 1995: 184), though Messer (1989) argues that households’ strategies to overcome seasonality and achieve food security undergo continual alternation as political, socio-cultural, economic and environments change simultaneously. Thus, the question that this chapter attempts to answer can be simply

expressed: how do poor households facing food deficits choose between the various strategies available to them by way of response? As elsewhere suggested (see Davies, 1996; Devereux, 1993; Beraki, 2009), households employ coping strategies in response to a food crisis that are often damaging to livelihood sustainability and they incur risks that may actually increase their vulnerability to food insecurity in the long term. Thus, the discussion of this question comprises two main objectives: i) to examine the food entitlements derived from coping strategies pursued by the households to survive during the Monga and how these are played out; and, ii) to understand the constraints, possibilities and considerations associated with these strategies in the context of their effectiveness in reducing transitory hunger and, in turn, long term livelihood outcomes.

7.2 Questioning household coping strategies: Theoretical construct

Though the literature on coping has mainly addressed food security, particularly in the context of drought, seasonality and famine (Trærup, 2010), Devereux (1993: 52) argues that Sen's (1981) 'entitlement approach' to poverty and famine analysis offers no solution for enquiries about household responses. However, 'coping' is considered as a response to an immediate and non-habitual decline in access to food (Davies, 1996) and as a means of averting immediate livelihood threats (Berry, 1989; Devereux, 2001; Ellis, 1998, 2000; Huq and Reid, 2004; Vogel, 1998). Adger (2000: 357) describes coping strategies as "short-term adjustments and adaptations to extreme events, [which] are usually involuntary and almost invariably lead to a different subsequent state of vulnerability." Based on the household's resilience and sensitivity (see, Bayliss-Smith, 1991)⁷⁶, Davies (1996) argued that in a vulnerable livelihood system (low resilience and high sensitivity) households are more likely to pursue adaptive strategies, seeking to use all available options at all times. Thus, coping strategies may develop into adaptive strategies through time (Berkes and Jolly, 2001) when they are used every year, for example, when transitory food insecurity becomes chronic (Davies, 1996: 55). Here, coping strategies are viewed as adaptive strategies in seasonal adjustments and coping represents a normal component in the lives of subsistence households in developing countries (Trærup, 2010). Adaptation strategies thus often measure means of reducing sensitivity and the need for coping (Siri *et al.*, 2005). But Trærup (2010) argues that coping under this lens makes it difficult to distinguish between situations in which households are coping and situations in which their responses are normal behaviour. However, by fuelling up coping and adapting

⁷⁶ Bayliss-Smith draws on Blaikie and Brookfield's (1987) analysis of the sustainability of agricultural ecosystems in distinguishing between these characteristics. Here, highly resilient systems have the capacity to bounce back to a normal state after a food crisis, contingent upon having coping strategies which are reserved for the periods of unusual stress. The sensitivity of a livelihood system refers to the intensity with which the shock is experienced: in highly sensitive systems coping strategies are not available to cushion the shock. Further, the greater the sensitivity, the further the system will need to bounce back; consequently, there is a vicious cycle between increasing sensitivity, declining resilience and an inability to bounce back (Davies, 1993).

strategies into livelihood security, Devereux (1999) states that poor households everywhere survive by pursuing a mix of livelihood strategies: these are ‘accumulation’ strategies (seeking to increase their income flows and stocks of assets); ‘adaptive strategies’ (to spread risk through livelihood adjustments or income diversification); ‘coping’ strategies (to minimise the impacts of livelihood shocks) and, ‘survival’ strategies (in extremes, to prevent destitution and death). Thus, households adopt different adaptive strategies which are involved in response to a gradually deteriorating food security situation, for example, seasonality which is predictable in its cyclical occurrence but not in its severity; whilst coping – and in extremes cases, survival strategies – are responses to sudden shocks or threat, for example unpredictable events such as a flood or rapid price inflation. Further, regular shocks like seasonality are somewhere between these two: since seasonality is predictable, households develop adaptive mechanisms, but coping strategies might be needed if a particular seasonality is unusually severe and further if more severe, households choose survival strategies. Table 7.1 summarises the role of different strategies adopted by the households in a vulnerable livelihood system for coping with food insecurity and hunger.

Table 7.1: Role of coping strategies in vulnerable livelihood system.

Vulnerable system (Low resilience/high sensitivity)	
Normal situation	
1. Production	Often need change to forms of agriculture that increase resilience and reduce the need for coping
2. Claim	Reciprocal links under increasing strain
3. Accumulation	Secondary activities essential to meet food deficit (no buffer) Coping strategies used when (1) and (2) fail to meet food needs, in part of every year (no 1 st or 2 nd buffer) Over time, coping strategies become part of secondary activities (3), i.e. <i>adaptive</i> strategies
Severe situation	
4. Coping	Genuine coping strategies reserved for hunger Coping strategies become fewer and fewer - i.e. <i>Survival strategies</i>

Source: Modified after Davies, 1996 and Devereux, 1999.

Several qualitative studies of famine in South Asia and Africa have reported a common pattern in the nature and sequence of coping and survival strategies adopted by the rural vulnerable people facing a food crisis (see, Chen, 1991; Corbett, 1988; Devereux, 1993; Mardiharini, 2005, Norhasmah, *et al.*, 2010; Radimer *et al.*, 1992; Radimer, Olson and Campbell, 1990). Corbett (1988) summarised these studies and generalised a pattern of three stages, reflecting increasing desperation: insurance mechanisms (e.g. savings), disposal of productive assets (e.g. sale of advance labour) and destitution behaviour (e.g. distress migration). One mode of

conceptualising this process is ‘sequencing approach’ strategies that have little long-run adoption at first, then strategies with higher long-run costs that are difficult to reverse, and finally survival strategies that reflect economic destitution and failure to cope (Campbell and Trechter 1982: 2121). Another way of looking at this distinction is as a choice between erosive and non-erosive behaviour (de Waal, 1989): some strategies that are employed to cope with the seasonal crisis without any threat for losing well-being in future are ‘non-erosive’, and strategies that deplete the household asset base and thereby undermine its future viability are ‘erosive’ (Devereux, 1999). However, there have been reactions against a strictly sequential approach in conceptualising household food strategies (Amare, 1995). Devereux (1993) and Majake (2005) argue that households do not always apply coping strategies in a one dimensional sequence as earlier literature suggested; rather, coping strategies are adopted in multiple and iterative layers; several discrete strategies are adopted simultaneously.

Watts (1983: 259), one of the proponents of the structural–political economy approach, claims that people affected by food insecurity and hunger respond in different ways, depending on their economic position, as well as the social and political linkages involved (Zaman, 1989: 198). The World Bank (WDR, 2000/01) classifies the coping strategies according to whether they involve formal insurance mechanisms or informal arrangements (Figure 7.1).

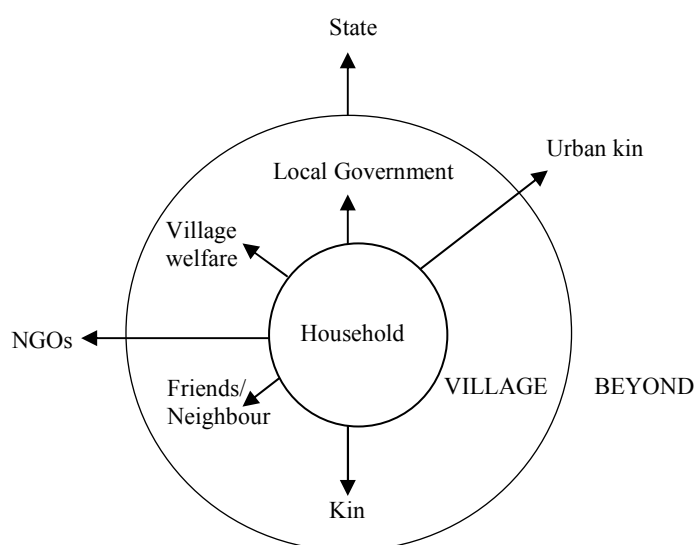


Figure 7.1: Networks which the household constructs in pursuit of coping strategies.
Source: Based on Adams (1996).

Informal strategies are developed at the individual and household level, and in non-market transfers. Based on kinship, friendship and patronage, this moral economy mediates the flow of non-market claims and transfers in a variety of forms ranging from cereal gifts to migrant remittances and labour exchange (Adams, 1993: 41). On the other hand, formal mechanisms may be market-based or provided by governments/NGOs. Cross cultural literature suggests

that irrespective of level of development, the national government generally assumes responsibility for minimizing hardships by organizing relief work, providing loans and grants, and generating employment for food insecure people and hazard victims (Paul, 1998; Jodha, 1991). Local and national NGOs may also provide support for attempts to cope with food insecurity. But their actions are mainly adaptive in nature and rooted to the structural changes in livelihood strategies. However, in many developing countries, it has been claimed that formal credit and insurance markets are less developed and asset poor households face constraints in access to these institutions (Watts, 1983; Blaikie *et al.*, 1994; Modena, 2008).

The literature on coping strategies discussed above has mainly emerged out of a concern to understand particularly how rural people survive during drought-induced famines and seasonality (Devereux, 1999). As the Monga situation is less severe than for famine and the food insecurity at household level is not a question of food availability, I argue that the general principle and pattern that the coping strategies literatures highlight are centrally relevant to the Monga-prone areas. Elsewhere research suggests that coping strategies vary between different subsistence societies but the general sequence of adoption of progressively desperate strategies is common (Majake, 2005; Maxwell *et al.*, 2003; Corbett, 1988; Watt, 1983). In summary, I would say that the ability in coping with hunger is contingent upon people's capacity to adopt (Davies, 1993) and draw upon the sources of support presented in Figure 7.1, on the basis that the less the involvement with the supporting sources, the greater is the risk of low returns in livelihood outcomes, and all strategies are characterised as a continuum, rather than as discrete categories (Devereux, 1999).

7.3 Households responses to the Monga

In the study villages, coping strategies for households have a number of foci. As the effect of the stresses of Monga and food deficit situation vary and are household-specific, each household has a unique resilience or ability to cope. Households pursue coping strategies that are not hermetically sealed from habitual activities and the entitlements to which they give rise; rather, they are extensions or adaptations of such activities (Davies, 1996). Similarly, some coping strategies rely on the same entitlements which condition production, but again, they are distinct from habitual productive activities. In fact, coping strategies are often inherent features of existing production systems (Huijsman, 1986: 143). Heightened and intensified during the Monga and disaster periods, the focus of household coping strategies is primarily based on consumption smoothing to meet the household's most basic needs. Their adopted strategies thus can be primarily categorised into two broad dimensions: budgeting in the household economy and, the range of food entitlements; both of them are to balance income

expenditure, food access and food consumption. The range of household coping strategies identified during the fieldwork is summarised in Table 7.2 followed by a discussion.

Table 7.2: Household sources of food coping entitlements and specific responses.

Entitlement based (generic)	Responses (specific)
Production based	Cultivation of SDR varieties of rice Vegetable production and consumption Poultry (chicken/goat/cow rearing)
Accumulation based	Paddy stocks in the household (from production) Rice storage by women before cooking Stocks of paddy at the Community <i>Dhan</i> bank Storage of dried food items Cash savings CPRs based (Collection of foods, fodder and fuel) Intensify fishing
Non-market Transfers	Cash support from kin/urban kin Food borrowings from relatives/kin and rich households Inter-household food transfers Very small scale retailing Cash loan from <i>Mahajan</i> Begging
Asset-based	Sale of livestock Sale of productive assets, domestic goods Mortgage <i>Dadon</i> (sale of advance crops/labour)
Labour based	Work in rich households/land Alternative occupation (within village or nearby areas) Migration
Consumption based*	Reduction of expenditure Reducing the number of meals and amount of food intake Switching over to inferior foods
Institution Assisted support based (cash and food transfer)	Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Allowance for aged people Allowance for widows Work at GO/NGOs offered programme (e.g. FFW) Credit from NGOs/Bank Cash Loan from <i>samity</i>

* For details response see chapter seven. Here only three major responses have mentioned corresponding to the core characteristics.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

It is important to note here, as we have seen in the previous chapter that the core characteristics of a household's food insecurity and hunger during the Monga is mainly a wide range of

consumption-related coping behaviours like skipping meals, reducing food intake, consumption of wild foods and so on, thus the following discussion does not include further those dietary-related strategies.

7.3.1 Production-based coping

Changing cropping patterns by introducing new crops, inter-cropping, mixed-cropping, or early maturing varieties is well known as a strategy for reducing seasonal food insecurity in countries where seasonality is closely linked with a ‘hungry’ pre-harvest season and it is well documented in the literature, particularly in Asian and African countries (Bohle *et al.*, 1991). Among the possible diversifications of agricultural crop patterns, introducing short durational rice (SDR) varieties, is a new and limited strategy in Rangpur region but it is getting some positive results in combating the Monga as participants of the different FGDs mentioned. SDR varieties take less time from sowing to harvest compared to the traditional long durational varieties of *Aman*, but give the same or sometimes a higher yield compared to the traditional *Aman* (RDRS, 2011). The combined efforts of a large number of agricultural scientists, government agricultural extension officials, and NGOs working in the north have introduced different SDR varieties⁷⁷ since 2006 (Neogi and Samsuzzaman, 2011). I found that, assisted by the RDRS and the Agricultural Office, a few of my FGDs participants, mainly small farmers, cultivated the SDR variety named BRRI *dhan33* in 2011.

“It was the first time I cultivated BRRI 33. I found it profitable. I got a production of 13 mounds per *bigha* which was 5 maunds greater than the traditional one that I cultivated before. Besides, due to early harvest during the peak Monga season (September-early October) I could earn cash and also get ready for the *Robi* crop cultivation.”

(Abed Ali, male, 49 Year, participant of FGD in Sundarganj, on 5 January, 2012)

Abed Ali also commented that he got access to food as the price level due to SDR rice production remains stable due to the supply of rice during the Monga months; and he sold the SDR rice straw as fodder at the time when there is a shortfall (usually in traditional *Aman* rice cultivation) of cattle feed. An agriculture officer from Lalmonirhat district pointed out some of the benefits in such new crops:

⁷⁷ The popular varieties which are now cultivated this region are: BRRI Dhan 33, BINA Dhan 7 (takes 100 -108 days in direct sowing and 115 -125 days in transplanted rice), BU Dhan 1 (115- 120 days), and Pariza (70-75) days. The average production of these SDR varieties is ranging from 14 to 16 mounds per *bigha*. Along with these SDR varieties, some other short durational and flood tolerant rice varieties (e.g. IR64 sub 1) have also been introduced recently in the northwest region (RDRS, 2011). Two drought tolerant varieties of rice named BRRI Dhan 56 and BRRI Dhan 57 are also now cultivated by the farmers in drought-prone regions, mainly Rajshahi and some parts of Rangpur division (ibid).

“The farmer can get many advantages from the cultivation of SDR by following a new cropping pattern like SDR–Early potato/Tobacco/Mustard/Wheat/Early Vegetable – Maize/Boro/Jute/pulses etc. Early harvest of SDR helps them to prepare land for early sowing of winter crops and vegetable. They can also receive a high market price for SDR. Wage labourers can work in the field now for longer and thereby outmigration may be reduced. But the adaptation of the SDR varieties is still at a minimum level.” (Interviewed, Lalmonirhat, 2012)

Participants of the FGDs in Sundarganj also reported that the RDRS is giving training and promoting SDR varieties cultivation. But it is the comparatively larger farmers who are now adapting these new varieties rather than the marginal sharecroppers. As possible causes they mentioned: tenancy burden (lack of mutual interest between the marginal farmers and their landlords), unfamiliarity with the related technology (e.g. drum seeder technology) and yield to the farmers, lack of availability of good quality of seeds and investment, etc. However, most of the households in the FGD sessions who are not yet cultivating SDR varieties also acknowledge it as a good practice due to its comparative benefits that are becoming known through other farmers who are practising nowadays and the NGOs and agriculture department.

Households having a small plot of land or homestead area are now taking on some small scale vegetable production (photograph 7.1) with NGOs assistance for consumption as well as earning some income before the Monga. These are mainly seasonal vegetables (photograph 7.2) and some coping vegetables like vain potato (as stated earlier in section 7.3). Usually women within the male-headed and the female-headed households use this strategy to supplement household incomes.

“Three years ago, I came to know that a NGO named UST (Unnayan Shahaojogy Team) was going to start some activities for poor women like me by forming a *samity*⁷⁸. I attended the meeting and was encouraged to join that *samity*. As a member I have got training on how to cultivate vegetables on my small homestead land by using organic compost. After that I started to cultivate vegetables and I got a good yield. Still I am pursuing this, which helps me to earn some cash and eat vegetables when we need to, particularly during the Monga.”

(Jamila Khatun, female, participant of FGD in Rowmari, 24 November, 2011)

Since 2009, with the technical support of Practical Action Bangladesh, five local partners NGOs – JSKS, UDPS, OVA, GUK and Akota – have been motivating the extreme poor, the destitute women and marginal farmers to cultivate sweet pumpkin (as mentioned in chapter six) in unused *char* land, particularly the fallow dried river bed of the Teesta, to deal not only with the exigencies of Monga but also the household poverty situation as a whole (BSS, April

⁷⁸ A small social organisation belong by the same economic group of people at village level mainly run various welfare programmes.

10, 2012). As we stated in the previous chapter that many poor *char* households⁷⁹ are now cultivating sweet pumpkins in the month of October, just after the monsoon, as an early strategy to cope with the little Monga period. The recession of water is the best time for this type of cultivation, with harvesting before the little Monga. Households also preserve the seeds for the next cultivation (Photograph 7.1) and sell a good amount of seeds in the market, easing cash needs. Other forms of production based strategies I found from the participants of different FGDs are poultry farming, beef fattening, and plant nurseries, but these are mainly adopted by the small to medium farming households, not specifically to cope with the Monga but also to improve their household economy and escape from poverty. Affected poor households cannot take on such production-based strategies due to a lack of investment capacity and land, and because of the risk of failure. Therefore livestock such as small scale home-based chicken, goat and cattle rearing remain a limited popular strategy in fighting the Monga and year round poverty.



Photograph 7.1: Small scale vegetable cultivation in homestead and seed preservation.
Source: CEGIS, 2005 and Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

7.3.2 Accumulation based

Usually farming households store a minimum amount of paddy to tide themselves over the Monga. As one would expect, the level of stock is related to farm size, production and the amount of distress sales⁸⁰. It is only after the harvest that households can get a fair idea about how much they have to sell in order to meet their cash needs and how much they can store for consumption up to the next harvest. As we have already seen in chapter five, small and marginal farmers have to dispose of their produce as quickly as possible to pay their debts and meet other exigencies. They are unable to store sufficient harvested crops both to maintain the household's consumption needs and for getting a better price in future when supply in the market decreases. Female-headed and wage labour-based households do not have the capacity

⁷⁹ According to the national news agency BSS (April 10, 2012), a total of 1384 acres of char land have been brought under pumpkin cultivation with the production target of 16,243 metric tons in 2012.

⁸⁰ Distress sales are defined as sales taking place within one month of harvest and are treated as an unacceptable and sordid phenomenon (Hossain and Bayes, 2010).

to store paddy from production as most of their everyday food provisions depend on market buying. Nonetheless, there is a small amount of rice stocking generally by women in almost all of the households. They save by keeping back one or two handfuls of rice in a pot when they cook during normal times. Though this amounts to a very small amount of rice storage, women practice this strategy every day whenever they cook rice.

“Sometimes I don’t have enough rice to cook. Even this situation I try to save at least one handful of rice. I think if I take a smaller amount of food now, this saving will help me to cope with the hungry times when no alternative option exists.”

(Monzila Khatun, female, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 17 February, 2012)

Some women reported that by using this traditional strategy they can meet one week’s rice demand of their family during the Monga but obviously this depends on their household size. Women usually prefer to keep such stocks for the flood season because purchasing rice then from market becomes difficult as they are confined to their homes or in severe cases have to move to flood shelters. Also the price of rice in the market often increases at such times. Indeed, this little rice stock is for food crises. Along with such little stock of rice there are other food items that families stock, particularly for the flood period. These are:

- Dried sweet potato pieces
- Dried small jute leaves
- *Sutki* (dried preserved fish with salt or without salt),
- *Muri* (puffed rice), *chira* (flattened or beaten rice) and *gur* (local type of sweet)
- Jackfruit seeds
- Bean seeds

I found that two of my studied households in the Luxmichap union of Nilphamari district, use a new strategy of rice paddy stocking at community level through a Community *Dhan* Bank. As a member of the *Dhan* bank they deposit a certain amount of *Dhan* (according to their available capacity, but a minimum of 10 kg) in a good time to the *Dhan* Bank and then borrow it back during the Monga. When they return the paddy again, usually they add a predefined amount of extra paddy which ultimately helps the growth of their own and the *Dhan* Bank stock as well. Details about how the *Dhan* bank works is given in BOX 7.1.

“In the time of Monga when I borrow from *Dhan* Bank, the price of one bag (50 kg) paddy is a minimum Tk. 1500 and when I return it the maximum price per bag is Tk. 900 and therefore I save a minimum gain of Tk. 600 per bag. Although I have returned the paddy with interest, this additional amount goes to me at the end of the year.”

(Ambia, female, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 2 January, 2012)

A number of households reported this saving of rice in the good times, particularly after both the *Aman and Boro* harvest. In the first year (2007) when they became members they faced difficulty in paying the first amount of paddy, but now they have accumulated a substantial amount of rice paddy in the *Dhan Bank*.

“As a set rule when I became a member of the *Dhan Bank*, that year I deposited the minimum requirement. But now I have 40 kg of paddy savings. I can now at least meet our rice demand during the *Kartiker Monga*.”

(Bashir Miah, Male, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 November, 2011)

Those households involved seem to have benefited from the *Dhan Bank*’s activities. Evidence shows that rice/paddy banks are increasingly popular in South-East Asia, especially Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand (Datt, 2007). Elsewhere research stated that this is not only far cheaper than borrowing from moneylenders but also helps to reduce exploitative practices, meet specific basic needs, and promotes collective decision making (Yokoyama, 1996).

BOX 7.1

How does a *Dhan Bank* work?

The idea of a Community *Dhan Bank* was initially proposed by Professor S. Dara Shamsuddin and some of his colleagues of Jahangirnagar University in 2006 at Laxmichap union in Nilphamari district with the cooperation of the Northwest Focal Area Forum and RDRS Bangladesh. The implementation of this *Dhan Bank* was done with the assistance of a local NGO named Udayankur Sheba Snagstha (USS). Initial major funding was through private donations by philanthropic Bangladeshi individuals living abroad. Since then, the *Dhan Bank* has distributed rice twice a year, once during October/November and a second time in March/April. These two periods are the most severe months. The responsibility for executing the programme at village level is taken by the community.

Initially at the grass roots level teams are formed, considering the earning capacity of the family to make sure that once they take paddy from the *Dhan Bank* they will eventually be able to return it in time with an extra amount. The normal practice that I found is for there to be 12 to 15 teams are under one *Dhan Bank*. Most of the members of the *Dhan Bank* are female. The existing members discuss the appropriateness of an applicant before they agree to their admission. There are varied practices about the minimum and maximum number that can be in a team (min. 15 and max. 30 members). From the members they elect a committee, namely ‘*para* (village block) committee’. From all *para* committees, an executive committee is formed for each *Dhan Bank*.



Photograph 7.2: The left photo shows the Community *Dhan Bank* and the right photo shows the paddy stock in the *Dhan Bank* godown (warehouse).

Source: Field work, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

To become a member one has to pay Tk. 100 (non refundable) and 10 kg paddy. The collected paddy is then accumulated along with the paddy purchased by the Green Foundation's donation. At the time of the Monga the accumulated paddy is lent to the members on condition that they return the same amount after the Monga period with an extra 10kg per bag. The amount of paddy that the banks allow to each lender is normally in the range of 70 to 105 kg. Indeed, the lender and the borrower is the same person. It means that what you deposit today in a specified sack will be lent to you at the time of the Monga. The Paddy is stored as the member deposited it with his/her name on the top of the bag. While collecting and distributing paddy, members of the bank also maintain two different funds namely a 'savings fund' and an 'organizing fund'. In the savings fund, every member deposits Tk. 5 per month and the executive committee of the *Dhan* Bank deposits the money in the local bank. Donations, money from the sale of extra paddy (if not distributed), membership money etc. forms the organizing fund to maintain the operational expenditure. Both funds added together make a large amount of money and that money is given to the members as loans. Members give the loan back in instalments with interest. Earned interest is distributed among the members in profit sharing at the end of the year. Therefore, a member benefits from the money s/he deposits in the bank irrespective of whether s/he borrows from the *Dhan* Bank or not. As a result, members treat the loan from the banks in a positive way, as if they are using their own money and they realise that for their own betterment they have to give it back. This removes the concerns of any credit system: defaults. In the second set, there are indirect benefits that can be converted into financial terms. Some of them are in point: educational facilities for children; free medical services sometimes; and, counselling by Udayankur Sheba Sangstha and donors in bad times.

Source: Islam, 2012.

Elsewhere, it is well documented that households with cash savings are less likely to experience food insecurity (Cristofar and Basiotis, 1992; Olson *et al.*, 1997; Rose *et al.*, 1995). Like paddy stocking, cash savings are limited in my field area. Only small and marginal farming households with good harvests are able to save some private cash. Female and wage labour households reported that after meeting the regular household expenses, it is very hard to save some cash against future food security. Women in male-headed households sometimes save and often hide a little amount of money from their husbands, but this is not a regular practice. Participants of FGDs reported that typically a four to five member wage-based family spend TK 3500 to 5000 per month in the mainland areas in normal times, whereas they can save hardly TK 500 to 1000 in the two month long Monga period. So, clearly it can be realised how savings could help the poor to cope with the Monga. The causes that they pointed to are the burden of the repayment of loans or the use of surplus earnings to meet household needs or consuming luxury foods frequently after the harvest. This is also supported by Zug (2006). Households reported that as a member of a *samiti* they have to save a fixed amount (i.e. per week TK. 10 to 20, or some cases I found a maximum of TK. 50) though this is not sufficient to cope with hunger). Households reported some other points:

“If we have rice we cannot finish it so easily but if we have cash it is easily spent.”

(Abdul Hoq, male, wage labour, Alekder Char, Sundarganj, interviewed on 3 March, 2012)

“In keeping cash there is a risk of theft during the Monga.”
(Hares Miah, male, wage labour, Kaliganj, interviewed on 12 March, 2012)

Zug (2006) also pointed out households’ unwillingness for cash savings by realising that other strategies may exist during the Monga. Elahi and Ara (2008) stated that people know that the government and NGOs will support them if the situation becomes worse. Such behavioural responses often dissuade households from building up savings when (after harvest or other good time) they are capable.

As we have seen in chapter five, having little access to and control over the CPRs is one of causes of vulnerability for the poor, however during the Monga dependency on CPRs becomes the core of food deficit management strategies for the affected households. Poor households who rely on the collection of green leaves, firewood, grass for food, fuel and fodder in the normal times become specialised in gathering during the Monga as they collect much unconventional and less preferred leaves and roots for consumption (for example, see chapter seven and below) and even selling them to other poor families.

- Food *Shapla* and *roktokomol* (stems of *Nymphaea nouchali*), , stems and leaves of *Kolmi* (*Ipomoea aquatica*), *Helencha* (*Enhydra fluctuans*), wet carnal of *Padmo* (*Nelumbo lucifera*), seeds of *Makna*, (wet, boiled, dried and fried), stem and leaves of *Maloncho* (*Alternanthera sessilis*)
- Fuel Dried leaves and branches of *Nol khagr* (*Phragmites karka*), *Jarul* (*Lagerstroemia speciosa*)
- Fodder *Kochuripana* (water hyacinth, *Eichhornia crassipes*), *Jhara Dhan* (swamp panic, *Panicum palludosum*), *Panchuli* (nymphoides hydrophylla)
- Economic *Hogla* (*Typha angustata*), *Shitol pati* (*Clinogyne dichotoma*), *Shola* (*Aeschynomene* sps.)

In addition to the intensified collection of food, the Monga period leads some landless labourers to seek fishing opportunities as a main occupation, which is a supplementary or secondary off-farm activity in normal times. This is a very traditional strategy because this season is the peak of open-access fisheries, when the floods recede (FAP 17, 1994). For this group, fishing has become an important component of their livelihoods (Hossain *et al.*, 2010). Participants of the different FGDs reported that in the severe Monga season, marginal and small farmers who have accepted the stigma of fishing in order to survive also exploit seasonal fisheries mainly for home consumption, to some extent selling to the market. Some fish at night. Although they evidently do fish and some of the catch may be sold, this group do not class themselves as ‘fishers’ (*jele*). Women and young children also fish using relatively

inexpensive, simple gear, again for consumption. Elsewhere, research suggests that for the rural poor, CPRs are either an important livelihood safety-net⁸¹, an “employer of last resort” (Barr and Dixon, 2001), or their livelihood portfolio (Magnus, 2003).

7.3.3 Non-market transfer based

The right to make claims on others, and the obligation to transfer a good or service, is embedded in the social and moral fabric of rural communities across the world (Scott, 1976). Like the other traditional societies, I found that during the Monga based on kinship, friendship and patronage, households pursue a variety of non-market claims and transfers. Non-market transfers occur alongside a complex of other household coping strategies some of which start at the beginning of the Monga and some others intensify as food insecurity increases in scope and severity, and reciprocity contracts.

During the Monga the first crisis faced by households is a shortfall of cash. Households try to take cash support from their relatives living nearby. Most important is the extended family. Usually this transfer is a loan for a negotiated period, not a gift. The amount of cash they claim is usually a very small amount for fear of getting nothing. As they frequently need to claim such support they do not ask the same relatives twice, but try alternatives. If they fail to get support from the extended family or relatives living nearby their village, then they look to kin who live in the town. But they have to use a different strategy for such claims.

“Sometimes we offer our relatives some interest against their cash loan, although not as high as we would pay to the *mahajan*. But often this does not work.”

(Abdul Hoq, male, wage labour, Sundarganj, interviewed on 3 March, 2012)

Usually the general figure of their loan amount varies according to their needs and relative economic condition. In some cases, urban kin sometimes plays a very good role during crises. Sometimes they not only provide cash support but also extend their support to take care of children of the affected households for a short period. Households having comparatively rich kin are in a good position in this regard. Neighbours also play a role as reported by the households. They may give food loan, particularly rice, *dal*, oil and other food items in a relatively small quantity. But, as nearly everybody suffers from the lean season, it is often not possible to support neighbours (Zug, 2006). Sometimes women engage themselves in exchange of a very few commodities. When the necessity arises, they normally exchange certain items of food or grocery items; but it is a very small amount and according to their

⁸¹ For example, in India it has been calculated that CPR currently contributes US \$ 5 billion to the incomes of the poor, or about 12% of the household income of poor households (Beck and Nesmith, 2000). This is 2.5 times the World Bank lending to India in 1996.

needs, e.g. vegetables for edible oil or kerosene for eggs. They may borrow some potatoes, green leaves, or a small amount of salt from a neighbour when they are hard up and then pay it back by the same item in same amount. Such exchanges are only possible when there is good neighbourliness among the women. Men are not responsible for such transfers. Sometimes women carry out small scale retailing with their neighbours, solely to meet immediate needs.

“My young daughter collects *kolmi shak* (green leaves) from the fallow low land. We don’t eat it every day. I walk around the village and sell it to the other poor houses, and though the cash I get is very little (Tk 5 for 1 kg) I am happy to get something.”

(Moriom Begum, female, widow, Dakhshin *Char*, Kaliganj, interviewed on 14 February, 2012)

Some small scale retailing items are eggs, vegetables, fruits, and cow dung for fuel. The income through such selling reduces the household’s everyday economic poverty by a very small degree. Sometimes households buy some groceries on credit and promise to pay the money when available. But this depends on the relationship between the retailer and the buyer household and their mutual trust. Similar findings are suggested by Zug (2006).

The most common coping strategy is to take a loan from a *mahajan* or a rich household, either cash or food. Poor rural households often have limited access to formal credit institutions and, as such, their only option is informal borrowing at high interest rates to provide “stop gap” financing and ensure minimum food consumption during the Monga that can trigger off a process of downward mobility (Rahman, 2002). Usually, as the poor fail to access the banks, they approach NGOs; when NGOs fail to provide loans as demanded, they approach the money lenders. Clearly there are some loopholes in the operational management of loans by NGOs. The money lenders, despite their exploitative roles, operate within this vacuum of socio-cultural and political space (Deb, 2009). Money lenders can therefore be considered local institutions for poor households⁸².

Crisis loans, particularly consumption loans as cash or paddy are taken at the beginning of the Monga or just before the harvest when the interest is lower than later in the Monga cycle. Such loans are taken for a relatively long period and given back after the following harvest or even sometimes later. Loans come in many forms and depend on many factors, but in whatever form, loans are crucial for keeping household finances liquid. Households reported that interest rates also vary according to the household’s economic condition and when the loan is taken. In normal times the interest is 10 to 12% per month. But when the Monga begins the interest rate (per month) increases abruptly:

⁸² This is supported by internal CLP monitoring of its beneficiaries, which suggests loans often average 10% of gross monthly cash income.

- 1st *dhap* (step) *Ashwini* (Beginning of *Ashwin*): 15 – 20 % interest loan period 3 months
- 2nd *dhap* (*Ashwini* (Middle of *Ashwin*): 20 – 25 % interest loan period 4 months
- Mora kartik loan (Beginning of *Kartik*) : 20 – 25 % interest loan period 4 months
- Last *dhap* (Middle of *Kartik*): 10 – 25 % interest loan period 1/2 months

Sometimes households take a loan in cash but pay the principal in cash and the interest in paddy. For example: “Last year I borrowed one maund (1maund = 37 Kg) of paddy with the promise to return one and half maunds after the harvest” (Armuj Hossain, male, wage labour, Rowmari, interviewed on 19 November, 2011). But getting a loan depends on relations with the people who are in a position to lend. Poor households, know full well that they will have to seek help from money lenders during the lean period in the next year and possibly at other times; they are resigned to it. Sometimes they try to keep money lenders in a good humour by giving services free or at a wage rate below the market rate, and they may also express political or factional allegiance. Such loans are thus alleged to be one of the factors responsible for increasing pauperisation and for perpetuating patron-client relationships (Alamgir, 1978)⁸³. However, not all households have the same ability to access cash loans from the *mahajan* or a rich neighbour. Those who are poorer, have to pay higher interest compared to the others. Zug (2006) had similar findings. Female-headed households, who are often reduced to begging, reported that even the loan with high interest are not available for them, as *mahajans* know their low capacity to repay and they do not want to take the risk of not getting their money back. Participants of the FGDs at different sessions told of a new money lender class. These are some members of NGO hierarchies who are engaged in a different type of usury system. They borrow cash from their NGO at a fixed interest rate and lend this money to the poor at a much higher rate than the *mahajan* or other money lenders. Their activities are limited and not disclosed, so that the powerful *mahajan*’s business is not challenged.

The reasons for taking consumption loans are numerous, but most cited are food, clothing, medicine, marriage, dowry and other sorts of immediate social affairs. These loans are solely for short term solutions and they cannot be maintained for a long period. The amount taken is small, for instance to buy clothes and to meet minor medical expenses. By comparison, loans

⁸³ It is noteworthy to mention that where this patron client relations is still prominent in northern region, particularly the *char* areas, recent studies on this relation in other region shows a decline trend resulted from different economic and social changes like the casualisation of the employment, an overall decrease in agricultural employment, the lack of agricultural labourers in the peak seasons, and increasing non-farm activities by landowners and NGO’s intervention, etc. See, Makita, 2007, for detail. However, as such relations are conditioned by complex sets of social and economic relationships, these differ from place to place but are found in most localities in one form or another.

for food and agricultural inputs are reported to be higher but they are still limited by the interest payments and are rarely sufficient to overcome their crisis and also hardly able to reach the stage of returning the loans that accumulate over years. Sometimes debts pile up so high that a household cannot manage to raise enough money for repayment.

Among the informal means, begging⁸⁴ is the final coping strategy, usually for female-headed households and aged men and women. Other households avoid this strategy, even if they have no option available, for example, “I will die, but never go begging” (Armuj Hossain, male, wage labour, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 19 November, 2011) as there is a social stigma attached to its practice. It means that who beg for cash or food for three main reasons: they are already destitute; they have no savings and have depleted their household assets by selling during the crisis; and, they are not eligible to gain credit from the NGOs and other governmental financial organisations like banks. However, begging occurs overwhelmingly within the local community (non-family), a fact underlining the social support networks in place to assist poorer households. But households reported that when crises affect a wider section of the community, the rural institution of ‘moral economy’ among not only the kin relations but also the neighbour relations tends to break down as the common trend is to build one’s own ‘economic safety nets’. Participants in the FGD sessions also mentioned that in the past some women became sex workers during the Monga in extreme situations, however, nowadays this is less practised due to availability of different options in the locality (e.g. taking loans from NGOs) and even through migration in the urban areas. Similar evidence was also reported by Elahi and Ara (2008).

7.3.4 Asset-based strategies

Selling assets to buy food is well documented as an economic adjustment aimed at protecting consumption (Devereux, 1996). Households reported that they very much want to preserve their assets⁸⁵ if they can find alternative sources of income or cash. But limited capacity often forces the affected households to sell their productive (e.g. livestock) or non-productive assets (e.g. household utensils). Another principal reason is repayment of debt, particularly as NGOs

⁸⁴ In a survey by PRIME in 2005 the percentage of beggars in Monga-affected areas was found to be 0.69 but the number of beggars is increasing at an alarming rate in those areas. Even when these people migrate they go on begging in the new place.

⁸⁵ De Waal (1989) showed that people will preserve assets in preference to meeting immediate food needs by choosing to go hungry in the short term in order to be able to produce in the future. In contrast, Devereux (1996) argued that a food deficit household can choose between selling assets for food or going hungry – but these options are motivated by diametrically opposed objectives. Each type of adjustment is associated with different objectives and has different consequences.

insist on immediate collection⁸⁶. The sale of assets might represent an inefficient use of resources, but in the short-term, they get quick financial returns (often at a loss), though it is implausible that the household can repurchase these assets at a later date (Conroy and Marks, 2008). The sale of livestock and household items, particularly chicken and goats, trees and household utensils are important features in this regard. These are easily liquidated and permit households to sell over relatively short periods depending on food and cash needs. Households having woodlots can attain a surplus status through some trading in wood and bamboo. I found that households having a cow usually try to keep it from being sold at any price as it is regarded as their most valuable asset.

“The cow is my most valuable asset as I am a landless. I never want to sell my cow. I know I can’t use any money I might get for selling cow on any productive purpose while the Monga runs, except consumption. Further, when I am ultimately forced to sell, the price would be depressed.”
(Female, wife of Hares Ali, Dakhshin *Char*, Kaliganj, free conversation held on 12 March, 2012)

The type and severity of a crisis determines whether a cow is sold or not, for example during a prolonged flood *char* households sometimes sell their cows due to a lack of anywhere safe to keep them (Akram, 2008). In years when the Monga crisis is more acute they are compelled to purchase hay or straw for their cattle. Then there is a competition between human and animal needs for resources that imposes a severe strain on the household economy (Yared, 1995) and at this point people may decide to sell. In an extreme case, one household (Bashir Hossain, male, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari, interviewed on 10 November, 2011) also reported sale of land and another (Kosiron, female, housewife, Sundorganj, interviewed on 15 December, 2011) sold gold ornaments. As they have to dispose of the items for sale rather quickly, they have to settle for lower than the desired price, but accept. Sometimes their items would fetch a better price if they have gone to a market some distance away (e.g. mainland bazaar or hat).

A mortgage on land or valuable ornaments is often taken out from a *mahajan* by households in a severe crisis. The *mahajans* also reap benefits from the same households by lending them money at very high interest rates (Elahi and Ara, 2008). This causes a further burden, as households sometimes never get back their mortgaged assets due to being incapable of paying off both the principal and the interest. *Dadon* (see, chapter five) is another prominent strategy adopted by households. Just as they sell assets in distress during the Monga, so farmers sell

⁸⁶ Deb (2009) observed that the ‘*dadonders*’ occasionally give waivers on loan interest but the NGOs never do, rather the NGO activists do everything possible (like snatching domestic animals, taking off roof tin, confiscating ornaments) for the full recovery of their money.

their next crop and their own labour in advance, usually at a loss, to the *mahajan* or rich households, highlighting their severe distress (Conroy and Marks, 2008). In extreme cases, households sell all of their family members' labour including children (as we have seen in chapter five). Farmers also reported that some tobacco companies and food production companies are also involved through middlemen as buyers of advance crop from the affected farmers for tobacco and maize.

Compared to the other households, farming households, and households having access to both formal and non-formal credit and loan facilities, make less distress sales. Female-headed and wage labour-based households make less distress sales, but it doesn't mean they have better finances and so are less in need; rather, it suggests they have fewer assets to sell in the first place. However, most of the households think that the contribution that asset sales make to household economies is often significant during the Monga, though it does not represent a strategy conducive to the long-term security of the household.

7.3.5 Labour-based strategies

Income diversification by households can be considered an economically rational risk management strategy allowing for greater household income and purchasing power (Johnson, 2004) and this type of strategy is universally adopted by households coping with food shortages (Davies, 1996). During the Monga, households try to intensify the division of labour in other subsistence occupations or government/NGO food and work programmes rather than their normal one, e.g. *char* men are as likely to be rickshaw pullers in one season as they are to be worked in paddy fields in another. The critical constraint on local labour-based strategies, however, is the limited opportunity to work outside of the agricultural sector; highly seasonally specific demand and wage rates are approximately halved, as we saw earlier in chapter 4.

However, within such limits, households take on some labour-based coping strategies. Women usually work, if they are able to get a position, in rich households. But competition is fierce as most destitute women are already engaged in such works and women in affected male wage labour headed households also try to enter into such occupations during the Monga. The work available for women in rich households is all of a domestic nature but is only for an average of 10-12 days during the whole two months. Women reported that this is insufficient to meet everyday food needs, meaning that they have to sell more hours at poor or seasonally variable local rates. Sometimes employers pay them in-kind (usually rice) or cooked food (usually rice

and one main dish) for one person, if they are generous they give some extra food, sufficient for one child.

“Last Monga season I worked in Alamgir Bapari’s house. I did not talk about my salary before being employed. After a total of 12 days work I got a *sharree* [women’s main wearing apparel]. I was happy because my regular one was too old to wear.”

(Amela, female, no fixed job, divorce, Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 13 November, 2011)

Households reported that they never avoid doing such works, when they can, during the Monga because of their basic needs. Poor women will take anything that their employers offer. Men, particularly agricultural wage labourers and marginal farmers will change their occupation in order to survive a crisis. I found that the most popular alternatives are rickshaw/van pulling on the mainland (mostly in the upazila sadar), tractor van driver, and recently to a small extent battery van driver (photograph 7.3). Some men become day labourers in the upazila sadar, mainly earth moving and construction work, though this is very limited. Male participants in the FGDs mentioned that finding such alternative activities is not easy. They face some constraints (Table 7.3) and also the income they earn in a day is two to three fold less than the wage they can earn from agricultural field work during the harvest; but they also reported that doing such work is better than migration.



Photograph 7.3: Tractor van (left) and van (right) driving are becoming popular occupations for the rural poor in the northern districts.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011- March, 2012.

Table 7.3: Selected alternative activities adopted by households and their constraints.

Activity	Constraint and barrier to entry	Income (approximately)
Rickshaw/van pulling	-Demand co-varies with agricultural risk -Power asymmetries (owner chooses whether he will offer the van) -No working capital, but every day has to pay a certain amount of cash to the owner) -Need reference -No regular wage	Highly variable Tk. 30-40
Tractor van/battery van	-Demand co-varies with agricultural risk -Power asymmetries (owner's choice whether he will offer the van; renting is difficult) -Need little or working capital (need advance deposit and then every day has to pay a certain amount of cash to the owner) -Need reference -Need good skills	Highly variable income Tk. 70-90 (Tractor van) and Tk. 100 - 120
Day labouring	-Need a group of workers, getting work individually is hard -No certainty to get every day	Highly variable income Tk. 40 – 60

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011- March 2012.

Migration is the most prominent of coping strategies in the greater Rangpur region⁸⁷ during the Monga. Diversification of income sources, facilitated by additional family workers working in the urban areas during the Monga have significant contributions to the economic uplift of households (Conroy and Marks, 2008). But the probability of migration is higher among households with younger heads and occupation-wise, day labourers are more likely to migrate than people in other occupations (Shariar and Khalily, 2010)⁸⁸. Recently due to the improvement of the road network, particularly after the opening of *Jamuna* bridge, migrant networks services like money transfers by mobile phone, transport courier, and the increasing experience of the migrants is contributing to the success of migration. I also found household migration strategy to be both distress-pushed and income-pulled.

⁸⁷ National-level data clearly show exceptionally high levels of inter-district out-migration from the Rangpur region. The findings of the official Agricultural Sample Survey 2005 are particularly revealing. Of all the country's agricultural workers who worked in agricultural and non-agricultural jobs outside their home districts, those originating from the five districts in Rangpur accounted for nearly one-half and one-quarter respectively, although the region accounted for only 11 percent of the country's population (see BBS, 2010). This population estimate is from the population census of 2001. Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) made a survey of migration from greater Rangpur and showed that the overall migration of North Bengal was 41% in the year of 2006. It may also be noted that, compared with other regions, overseas migration is relatively rare in the Rangpur region (Shariar and Khalily, 2008).

⁸⁸ They carried out the analysis based on the data from PKSF-InM Census of Poor Households in Lalmonirhat district (102,000 households) in 2006, and Kurigram district (154,000 households), Gaibandha district (126,000 households), and Nilphamari district (57,000 households) in 2007.

“I am not keen to migrate. It is a burden in life to go for such uncertainty.”
(Amzad Miah, male, small farmer, Aleker *Char*, Sundarganj, interviewed on 27 December, 2011)

“When there is no way to income in my area it is better to go to the town. At least I can earn something there.”
(Bashir Hossain, male, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 November, 2011)

Similar evidence is also suggested by the Khandker and Mahmud (2012). They argued that most out-migration in Rangpur takes place in the Monga season and thus seems to be induced by lack of local employment rather than peak-season labour demand in labour-receiving regions. The seasonal migration from Rangpur is thus unlike what is sometimes called “labour circulation” in the context of some African countries, where the timing of labour demand in the sending and receiving regions complement each other (Chambers, Longhurst, and Pacey 1981, 212). I found with some exceptions, that *char* people are usually not interested to migrate to other places.

“The *char* environment is different from the mainland; I feel very insecure to keep my wife and children in this isolated remote area. Besides, sending money for instance is more problematic. If I cannot send money during the crisis what would be the benefit of going to Dhaka?”
(Joynal Bapari, male, marginal farmer, Dhamur *Char*, Gangachara, interviewed on 23 February, 2012)

Factors that influence households actual decision-making regarding migration are: the nature of the labour market at the destination point; the availability of an extra family worker (usually male); the extent of social networks that the households can access; and potential costs of migration related to transport and relocation. I found that people in general tend to go back to the same place and people who had success are relatively more likely to stick to the same destination, and also where they have a good social network⁸⁹ so that they can get a job immediately after going there. The suitable destinations for the migrants are Bogra, Rajshahi, Dhaka, Comilla, Sylhet, Chittagong, Feni, and Khagrachari districts. Along with the regular bus services, during the Monga season special bus services ply from the upazila level of each district to prominent destinations, as bus owners know which districts are popular for migrants. They also offer a cheap rate and sometimes allow workers travel on credit and pay back the

⁸⁹ From my personal observation since 1992 in the Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka Bangladesh at first as a graduate student and then as faculty, I have found that most of the university campus rickshaw pullers are from the greater Rangpur region including the other northern districts like Panchagar, Sirajganj Thakurgaon. I observed that they have a well established social network. Most of them live at a place near the university, helping each other to go and come from the villages, helping with cash loans. They convey information to family members back home, help new migrants from their own villages to settling on the campus and to get a rickshaw to rent. They have also built up a good dialogue with rickshaw owners so that if anyone comes from the northern districts he usually will not face any major problem to become a rickshaw puller.

fare after having earned some money. Households reported that popular jobs at the destination place are rickshaw pulling, construction work, work in the brick fields, and transport workers. Participants of the FGDs at Rowmari pointed that in the past it was only males who migrated during the Monga season. Recently, young girls are migrating, particularly to Dhaka during this period, and working in the garment sector.⁹⁰ However, households having any migrant members during the Monga can cope comparatively better than the non-migrant households.

7.3.6 Assisted coping mechanism

During the Monga, a large segment of the affected poor try to access the GO and NGO services to cope with their hunger situation. During the field work, when it was the time of the Monga, I also saw that many poor men and women crowded to the union offices to find out whether any services existed. Through the interview and FGDs I found that both GO and NGO offered programmes for the Monga period are few compared to the long term livelihood and poverty reduction support programmes. The GO offered programmes are mainly the common social safety net programmes irrespective of any special situation. “The major difference is that the government increases the monetary sum it gives during the Monga period in this region” (Relief and Rehabilitation officer, Nilphamari, interviewed, 2012). The claims of NGOs are also like those of the government with a wide range of different types of credit programmes such as small credit, credit with low interest, special loan, agricultural loans, and asset transfers and training programmes for income generation, but most of them are year round programmes under different project schemes. Most of the national level large NGOs including the local level NGOs and international donor-funded programmes (e.g. CLP by DFID) are running in the northwest region (RDRS Report, 2011). However, in this section I discuss only the GO/NGO assisted programmes (Table 7.4) which households use as a means of coping with their seasonal burden.

⁹⁰ According to the BSS (4 December, 2011), it has also found that the migration of poor women from the impoverished northwestern districts to formal employment in the garment sector is substantially lower than that of poor women from other parts of the country.

Table 7.4: Households adopted different GO/NGOs assisted programmes during the Monga.

	Programmes	Beneficiary	Requirement	Cash or in kind	When and what they get
GO	Vulnerable group feeding (VGF)	Households	No work requirement	Food grain	Usually get during or post flood time. 10 kg of rice per month for three months
	Vulnerable group development (VGD)	Women capable of IGA (Young to middle aged)	No work requirement; skill training	Food grain	Skill training for undertaking income-generating activities; 30 kg of wheat per month in 30-month cycles
	Allowance for widow	Destitute women	No work requirement	Cash	Tk. 250 per month
	Allowance for old aged people	Old-age individuals unable to work	No work requirement	Cash	Tk. 250 per month
	100 day job schemes	Only one family member per household	Work	Cash	Different types of project works like channel digging, embankment building, earth filling, pond clearing, compost making etc.
NGOs	Cash credit	Household Mainly women	No work	Cash with interest	Income generating activities; week repayment and collateral needed.
	Cash loan from <i>samitty</i>	Household	No work	Cash with little interest	Own savings can take loan during the crisis. After a certain period return the amount with pre-fixed little interest. Aim of cash asset building.
	Work in projects	Women	Work	Cash Production based salary	Different income generating project works like <i>kantha</i> or mat making

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011- March, 2012 and Khandker and Mahmud, 2012.

I found that no households got VGF in 2011. The possible cause may be that these programmes are designed to help the poor cope and smooth their consumption at times of natural disaster such as floods, cyclones, and other natural calamities. That year, as the floods were at a 'normal' level, that is why they did not receive benefits, although their suffering was

certainly not static. Households who received VGF previously and VGD reported that those programmes helped them to deal with the Monga crisis to some extent. But they claimed that they did not get the amount of benefit they were entitled to.

“VGF is not offered every year. If you are lucky enough to get a VGD card you will get about half. We know where the other half goes.”

(Armuj Hossain, male, wage labour; Khadaimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 19 November, 2011)

Participants in all of the FGDs supported this allegation. Households who got the benefit engaged in strategies to use the food grain. As the VGD programme offers wheat, they sold a portion to any affected households who wanted to buy or to the local shop at less than the market price. This helps them to meet their cash needs. One of my householders told me that she (name withheld) sold her VGD card to a rich family for cash as she needed the money at that time. Women in the FGD session reported that under VGD programmes they received some training, but most could not engage in income-generating activities due to lack of investment.

The last caretaker government of Bangladesh launched (in 2008) the 100 day employment generation scheme for hardcore poor across the country to mitigate their suffering during the lean season (Sarker *et al.*, 2012). Households reported that this programme is good for them if it starts at the right time. It is usually women involved with this programme as most males have to migrate elsewhere. As the programme offers daily salaries in cash, they can spend their earnings to meet other needs as well as food. *Char* households worryingly reported that they are mostly excluded from this programme as the government did not initiate any development programmes in the *char* lands. This is left to the NGOs.

Widowed and old aged allowance recipients reported that as they have no regular and reliable source of income; hence this monthly allowance at least provides their households with something, although it is a small amount compared to monthly needs for family maintenance. It does give them some mental satisfaction, peace and relief; one householder said she felt ‘mentally happy and peaceful’ (Mariam, female, widowed, interviewed on 14 February, 2012); another said that “before getting this money we had no social dignity” (Ambia Khatun, widowed, Nilphamari, interviewed on 2 January, 2012). Reportedly, their credit worthiness in the community has advanced and so they have access to the informal credit market at times of need, viz., getting small loans has become somewhat easier. Though it is not their main coping strategy, they have become habituated with such allowances to meet their food and other household needs, even in normal times.

It was stated in chapter five that the really vulnerable landless and floating households often remain outside most of the safety net programmes implemented either by government or by NGOs due to their lack of a permanent address. In addition, participants of the different FGDs strongly criticised the government's weaknesses such as delays in supply, bribery, malpractices by local public officials, and nepotism in making lists of beneficiaries. Earlier researchers found something similar (Ali, 2006b; Zug, 2006).

Households reported that NGOs activities are manifold. Most of the households are somehow connected to one or more NGOs for different purposes, either as beneficiaries in targeted projects, or as loan holders. Throughout the year they are involved with their attached NGO activities, however, during the Monga they get mostly credit support and sometimes work in handicraft-making projects if available. The credit is usually in the form of loans, such as micro credit, although this not for the Monga as such. Their eligibility depends on their earlier payment history (see chapter five). Therefore, not all households have the same ability to access cash loans, as many poorer households are seen as high risk repayment defaulters. Whoever qualifies for a loan is able to reduce the impact of the Monga by a degree.

A cash loan from the *samitty* is another way to cope with the Monga. This sort of NGO-assisted community-level saving programme is a comparatively new initiative. Under such schemes participants are encouraged to save a minimum amount of cash (as we saw in section 8.3; e.g. *Dhan Bank*). Each share value is determined through open discussion among the participants. During the Monga most of the poor take a loan from the *samitty* with a pre-defined interest, and after harvest they usually return it. Households reported that it is more flexible than micro-credit; though the amount of a loan from the *samitty* depends on how much they saved in normal times, as it is actually their own deposit scheme. They further reported that they can take it any time of crisis, not just the Monga. *Char* households reported that they benefit more from NGO activities than government support in terms of health, sanitation and educational support for their children, but they want more support both during the Monga and for their permanent economic well-being:

“We need a permanent solution. NGOs give us many supports but these are for a particular time. When we asked the officials they tell us it is under a project, so it will be finished after a certain period.”
(Amzad Miah, male, small farmer, Aleker *Char*, Sundarganj, interviewed on 27 December, 2011)

7.4 Discussion: Effectiveness of coping strategies in the Monga and livelihood contexts

The food-related strategies identified above are consistent with the findings of several previous studies on the Monga (see, Zug, 2006; Shariar and Khalily, 2008; Khandker and Mahmud,

2012; Conroy and Marks, 2008). Seasonal coping strategies involve an attempt to balance household needs for minimum of food, with other basic items such clothes and utensils; though they are not merely efforts to maximise the former. But we have seen the scope for intensifying the use of coping strategies is itself limited, as they already account for a significant proportion of households' normal behaviour during the Monga, for example collecting food from CPRs, the widow allowance, etc. In this situation such practices are no longer really coping mechanisms used to survive an expected or actual dearth of food, nor are they temporary emergency measures for the preservation of livelihood (Cannon, 1991: 306). Instead, these strategies have been replaced by a process of adaptation as in the structurally vulnerable livelihood systems of the study villages. Households combine coping and adapting by optimising the trade-off between reducing sensitivity and increasing resilience (Davies, 1993; 1996). Some strategies are used by certain households all year round, and others in some seasons of all year. Besides, a fixed sequence of coping strategies is likely to be limited in reflecting reality (as Devereux proposed, see section 7.2) because the context is seasonal food stress as opposed to famine, and households are faced with different constraints, options and possibilities at a given point of time (Yared, 1995: 211). One strategy alone would probably be inadequate and they do not want to exhaust its possibilities. Thus, the strategies can be seen as expressions of negotiated decisions for meeting minimum consumption requirements and preventing starvation and destitution at a same time.

It is also apparent that the choices which households make (either the same or mix of strategies) would not suit everyone (Davies, 1996), and vice versa. The choice depends on a range of factors such as membership of a given livelihood system (e.g. farming or female-headed households); household size (e.g. large household can opt for a household division of labour to spread risk by earning income); related wealth (e.g. more livestock); whether they have high or low barriers to entry (e.g. requiring particular skills for SDR variety cultivation); strength of kinship and social network links to the traditional resource managers (e.g. rich urban kin); more access to the formal institutional support (e.g. farming households have better access to formal credit than that of the landless wage based households qualified for the credit), and so on. The role of normative values, social values and preference also has to be considered (Yared, 1995: 211) here, for example, marginal households express their distaste for begging. Devereaux's (1999) notion of households waiting to sell the least costly item in order to cope with food shortage has to be qualified by the consideration also of the role of social values, e.g. the sale of advance labour is avoided until the household has no alternative option. Further, some strategies are used (e.g. sale of assets) most frequently, indicating that

these are perceived by the households to be the best options available, more effective at least than others in filling an immediate food gap. But in line with Davies (1996), if we consider the adopted strategies in a livelihood context, not simply according to the entitlement from which they are derived or on the basis of prioritization like best option or the greatest effectiveness, these reflect both risk and expected return.⁹¹ Some strategies, such as taking a cash loan from a *mahajan* at high interest, may give a household instant cash for buying food and other basics, but at the risk of the erosion of future income and the risk of incurring further debt. Arguably in the long term livelihood context it has a low return⁹². In contrast, access to overnment and non-government support programmes may be clearly welfare-augmenting and have a low risk at present and high return in the future. As elsewhere, research suggests that intensity of use of the coping and adaptive strategies, their effectiveness in filling food gap and the ultimate gain/returns in livelihood outcome context (Davies, 1996), should all be considered as a good starting point to develop and formulate systematically robust and contextually sensitive direct indicators to measure household food insecurity (Norhasmah, *et al.*, 2010: 52) and to develop effective programmes and policies to mitigate seasonality and food insecurity as stated in section 8.1 (as stated earlier see, Kabeer, 1990; Messer, 1989). Therefore, based on Davies's (1996) notion, the coping and adaptive strategies identified in the section 8.3 are further classified according to the intensity of the uses of these strategies, their effectiveness during the Monga as well as in the livelihood context of Table 7.5.

It is not, however, easy to determine the effectiveness of various coping mechanisms in mitigating seasonal hunger simply by looking at Table 7.3. Because the adoption of various coping mechanisms and the outcomes in terms of the household food deprivation status are likely to be jointly determined by the same set of underlying factors, there is a problem in separating cause from effect. We can see that each coping strategy shows a different level of severity. Though households' focus is mainly on the deliverance of alternatives with lower negative impacts (Zug, 2006), and in this regard, obviously, the favourable strategies for the marginal households are low risk – high return in long run. But we have seen that most of

⁹¹ In the context of a balance between risk and returns in the livelihood context of Malian peasant society, Davies (1996) divided coping and adaptive strategies into four categories: low risk – low return; low risk – high return; high risk – high return; high risk – low return. She pointed out that low risk – high return strategies are obviously the most attractive, but in a marginal society they are also the least numerous. However, she also stated that these categories are not cast in stone and depend on the circumstances in which strategies are pursued. See, Davies (1996) for details.

⁹² Davies (1996) defined such strategies as double-edged strategies.

Table 7.5: Generalised pattern of the intensity of uses of different coping and adaptive strategies, their effectiveness and livelihood returns.

Entitlement based (generic)	Responses (specific)	Intensity of uses				Effectiveness of the strategies merely to overcome crisis	Livelihood Outcome (in long run)
		Female Headed homestead land	Female headed With homestead land	Male headed wage/ other labour	Male headed marginal farmer	Male headed small farmer	
Production based	Cultivation of SDR varieties of rice	---	---	---	---	Low	Low risk – high return
	Diversity into vegetable for eating and sale	---	Low	Medium	High	High	Low risk – high return
	Poultry (chicken/goat/cow) rearing	High	High	High	High	High	Low risk – high return
Accumulation based	Paddy stock at household (from production)	---	---	---	Low	Low	Low risk – high return
	Rice storing by women before cooking	High	High	High	High	High	Low risk – low return
	Stock paddy at Community <i>Dhan</i> bank	***	***	***	***	***	Low risk – high return
	Store of dried food items	Low	Medium	High	High	High	Low risk – low return
	Cash savings	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Low risk – high return
	CPRs based (Collection of foods, fodder and fuel)	High	High	High	Medium	Low	High risk – low return
	Intensify fishing	---	---	High	Medium	Low	High risk – high return
	Cash support from the kin/urban kin	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High risk – low return
Non-market Transfers	Food borrowed from relatives/kin and rich households	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	High risk – low return
	Inter-household food transfers	Low	Low	High	High	Low	Low risk – low return
	Very small scale retailing	Low	Low	Medium	High	High	Low risk – low return
	Cash loan from <i>Mahajan</i>	High	High	High	Medium	Low	High risk – low return
	Begging	+++	---	---	---	---	High risk – low return
Asset-based	Sale of livestock	Low	Low	High	High	Low	High risk – low return
	Sale of productive assets, domestic goods						High risk – low return
	Mortgage	---	***	High	High	Low	High risk – low return
	<i>Dadon</i> (Sale of advance crops/labour)	Low	---	High	High	Low	High risk – low return

Entitlement based (generic)	Responses (specific)	Intensity of uses				Effectiveness of the strategies merely to overcome crisis	Livelihood Outcome (in long run)
		Female Headed homestead land	Female headed With homestead land	Male headed wage/ other labour	Male headed marginal farmer	Male headed small farmer	
Labour based	Work at rich households/land	High	High	Low	Low	- - -	Low risk – high return
	Alternative occupation (within village or nearby areas) Migration	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low risk – high return
Consumption based	Reducing number of meals	---	---	High	Medium	- - -	High risk – low return
	Switching over to inferior food	High	High	High	High	High	High risk – low return
Institution Assisted support based (cash and food transfer)	Food Relief (only during disasters)	High	High	High	Medium	Low	Low risk – low return
	Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)	High	High	High	Low	Low	Low risk – high return
	Allowance for aged people	***	***	***	***	***	Low risk - low return
	Allowance for widow	High	High	- - -	- - -	- - -	Low risk – low return
	Work at GO/NGOs offered programme (e.g. FFW)	High	High	high	medium	Low	Low risk – high return
	Cash Loan from <i>samity</i>	High	High	High	Medium	Medium	High risk – high return
	Credit from NGOs/Bank	Low	Medium	Medium	High	High	High risk –high return

Index: Intensity of uses: *** high, if exists/need; - - - Not use; High = more frequently; Medium = frequently; Low = Less used/if necessary; +++: main occupation
 Effectiveness: High = well contributes to face Monga; Medium = not sufficiently contribute; Low = merely survives
 Livelihood outcome: Low risk – high return: most suitable; Low risk – low return: considerably secure;
 High risk- high return: insecure; High risk – low return: erosion of future livelihood

Note: The above status of the coping strategies was prepared based on the household interviews and participants' views/opening of the different FGDs under the framework proposed by Davies (1996). It is obviously much generalised pattern as use of the different strategies are relative and depend on their availability in their locality (e.g. use of community *Dhan* Bank is practised only by the Laxmichap union in Nilphamari District). Besides, some other issues might be considered here such as access rights, livelihood system specific, gender and age specific, high barrier to entry, incurs health risk, requires re-division of labour, normal behaviour than seasonal specific, etc. No pre-fixed strategies and no relative levels were introduced to the households and participants of the FGDs; rather, all the levels according to the strategy wise came from their own opinions.

cases these are high risk – low return in context of livelihoods. Overall, this clearly indicates that households are forced mostly to implement resource erosive coping strategies, which may be virtually irreversible (Blaikie, 1985) and destroy their own and their descendants' future livelihoods (Cannon, 1991: 306).

We have clearly seen in the previous chapter (section 7.2) that agricultural development has significantly reduced the Monga period. With some opposite views (mainly related constraints of SDR varieties cultivation, as mentioned in the foregoing section), most of the participants in the different FGDs commented that in the context of creating jobs in the agricultural sector and then raising the purchasing capacity of households in their areas, the possibility of agricultural diversification like SDR, flood- and drought-tolerant varieties followed by a new cropping pattern is high. From a workshop outcome⁹³ on the role of SDR varieties in Monga mitigation, RIB (2011) pointed out that to convert from the current coping strategy of cultivation of such SDR varieties to an adaptation stage and then, take on a permanent cropping pattern, will also help the marginal farmers to face possible future climate change impacts on their agriculture livelihoods. Likewise, vegetable production in the sand bar as an earlier means (i.e. saving some cash) for coping with the Monga, particularly in the *Chaitra'er* Monga season may be best studies in the their livelihood context.

Though accumulation strategies may be seen as offering the best opportunity for interaction with development assistance aimed at overcoming poverty and promoting sustained economic growth, but I found their uses in most cases to be very limited. Some strategies like saving handfuls of rice and storing dried food, though they are used frequently, their outcome is not as significant enough to deal with the crisis. Mazumder and Wencong (2012) showed that about 60.7 percent⁹⁴ of households have no capacity to accumulate stocks, or they have stocks for less than one day, with the result that they are likely to go hungry without a meal or have a meal on alternate days. This is indicative of their marginal livelihoods. New avenues such as a community *Dhan* bank may be one of the suitable options as the households themselves recognised. Success with the *Dhan* Bank-01 encouraged the inhabitants of Laxmichap union to introduce *Dhan* Bank-02 & 03. With finance from ActionAid Bangladesh, Udayankur Sheba Sangstha introduced a *Dhan* Bank project in the Chilahati area of Nilphamari. This started in

⁹³ RIB (Research Initiatives, Bangladesh) financed the Northwest Focal Area Forum, a GO-NGO network of greater Rangpur to carry out research aimed at assessing the performance of early maturing BRRI Dhan 33 during 2006-2007. The findings of the pilot project were reviewed in a follow-up dissemination workshop held on 8 April, 2007 at RDRS Auditorium, Rangpur. A large number of scientists, university professors, extension workers, representatives from GOs and NGOs, farmers and people from the media participated in the workshop and came up with the above recommendations.

⁹⁴ They carried out a survey from March to November 2009 of 900 households from five districts of the Rangpur Division: Kurigram, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari and Gaibandha by using a multistage and stratified random sampling.

2008 with 19 *Dhan* Banks and by September 2011 it had 20 *Dhan* Banks in total. However, its operational area is very localized and also its sustainability is in question if we consider Elahi and Ara's (2008: 9) observation that: "those who do not have enough land to cultivate or alternative income sources how they could be able to repay the paddy after the Monga period even they have had meagre job or income prospect at the least?" Participants of FGDs in Nilphamari stated that initially being a member of the *Dhan* Bank was easy, but now it is difficult for the poor people of the area. Pointing out this difficulty, the Chairman of Community *Dhan* Bank-01 of Akaluganj Bazar, Laxmichap union said:

"If anyone wants to be a member, on an average it takes minimum Tk. 3000 and 30 kg of paddy to be equal with the current member's minimum deposit. Now if anyone in the area has this amount of money in hand or paddy stock, he/she would be free of Monga effects almost."
(Interviewed, Male, Nilphamari Sadar, 2012)

Therefore, offering such interventions for all of the affected households in a village by including them in an existing *Dhan* Bank becomes harder, unless a new branch could be opened. Households also reported that they cannot borrow rice when the price of rice increases or during the floods. Thus, it is still too early to tell whether paddy banks will be self-sustaining. RDRS introduced a similar project in Nilphamari district, but they did not succeed mainly because they did not transfer the ownership of the *Dhan* Bank to the *Dhan* Bank members (Islam, 2012). As households cannot build up enough private cash savings of their own, therefore their chance of overcoming the Monga is limited. Elsewhere, Huijsman (1986: 144) argued that for households living near the subsistence level, the scope is clearly limited because in a tight budget situation under a low income livelihood, a reduction in expenditure is virtually impossible without endangering the normal functioning of the household.

Though the use of CPRs is central to responses of food stress and also in normal times, in the intense existing conditions, the future of CPR-based coping strategies is uncertain because these strategies are constrained by the fact they are often high risk (Davies, 1996), depend on having access rights, and are subject to the season-specific resource constraints and rapid rural land use changes in Bangladesh. Moorehead (1991) identifies a number of implications of household dependence on CPRs: increased conflict over access to these resources (see, chapter five), degradation of the resources base as use intensifies; and as more and more households exploit CPRs, increase of abusive practices and the erosion of traditional management systems. Thus, coping based on CPRs might actually increase risks in face of the Monga.

This possibility of reduced use of ‘dependency entitlements’⁹⁵, indicating an erosion of social ties, is supported by earlier research on the Monga (Hasan, 2006; Elahi and Ara, 2008; Ali, 2006b; Shonchoy, 2012). In the past people were able to cope because of the norms of ‘shared poverty’ prevailing in the *samaj* and *gushti* (patrilineage) they lived with (Elahi and Ara, 2008). Households would not allow others in the community to starve to death (Hassan, 2006). It was stated earlier in the chapter that this tradition of ‘shared poverty’ is often eroded itself when there is a widespread Monga, thus its use as a means of coping is limited. Elahi and Ara’s (2008) identified causes may be noteworthy to mention in this regard. They list the increase in population putting pressure on available resources; gradual breaking up of traditional joint/extended families, particularly after the post-independence period; and, occupation of marginal land, such as *chars*, areas of regular flooding or river erosion vulnerable to natural disasters. Besides, with the expansion of market exchange, it is frequently argued that non-market transfers are irrelevant vestiges of a ‘*merrie*’ moral economy, and now of little significance relative to market-oriented strategies employed to overcome food insecurity (Adams, 1993). But it should also be noteworthy to mention that the shifting nature of transactions from kin-based to market-based is often associated with heightened vulnerability for the poor households who are left stranded between the two systems⁹⁶ (Devereux, 1993).

The most desperate survival strategy but the most adopted is to accept a consumption loan or cash from *mahanjans* or rich families at a very high rate of interest, as we have seen. Such debt relations stand at the core of the local level political system and are clearly grounded in patron-client relationships. It is obvious that this system is very exploitative and reflecting a high level of intrinsic riskiness in the livelihood capacities of the households. Rahman (1995) states for greater Rangpur that “there are relatively few resource-rich people at village level who could be a major source of crisis-period borrowing to tide over the deficit period”. Therefore the number of money lenders and the amount of money they lend is limited, reducing competition and making it possible for money lenders to exploit the poor and locking many of them into long-term dependency (Zug, 2006). Most of the households recognised such strategies are tantamount to ‘social suicide’. Another such ‘suicidal’ strategy is *dadon*. Such distress sales of labour and crops in advance at a very cheap rate can be considered a marker of household vulnerability; indicating that the household has had to make a strategic decision to forgo future

⁹⁵ Sen afterwards put forward the notion of ‘extended entitlements’ (Sen, 1986; Drèze and Sen, 1989) to cover ‘socially legitimated’ entitlements that were not conferred by market mechanisms; these included intra-family allocation of food, or what has been labelled as ‘dependency entitlements’ (Bongaarts and Cain 1982, cited in Devereux 2001: 250).

⁹⁶ Sen labelled this transitional process as ‘pre-existing systems transition’ (PEST).

income and asset accumulation in return for a quick capital injection into the household finances (Conroy and Marks, 2008).

With the distress sale of the labour and crops, households transform their non-productive assets as a last resort and use them as a hedge for periods of the Monga. However, such sales obviously affect the functioning of the households, which also applies to a lesser extent, to consumer durables (Huijsman, 1986), in context of the price they get and in the risk of not building such assets again in future. Households recognised livestock as a ‘blessed asset’. When livestock like a chicken or goat is sold, some or all of the revenue raised is invariably used to purchase food, suggesting that livestock are held partly as saving to be drawn down in times of need. Thus, like elsewhere, though on a limited scale – a livestock sale is a standard coping response by households to food security (Devereux, 1993) – except the most productive milk producing cow.

The most favourable coping strategies in the view of most households is the diversification of income-generating activities, which has both short-term survival benefits and potentially high return livelihood outcomes. Needless to say such opportunities are scarce. Though NGOs offer training to create self employment, their projects are usually of short duration or irregular, and so do not make any substantial change in the labour markets of marginal villages, particularly the remote *char* areas. As to possible causes of the underuse of labour-based coping strategies, Alauddin Ali said:

“All are very recent NGOs based not only on Monga combating attempts, but also on target-oriented poverty eradication and capacity building programmes. To maximise their success, I think, an increase is needed in the target number of affected households and the area covered. Besides, poor households need related training, sufficient financial investment to open up self employment and motivation to take on new challenges. Implementing organisations need regular follow-up and if necessary to provide further assistance.”

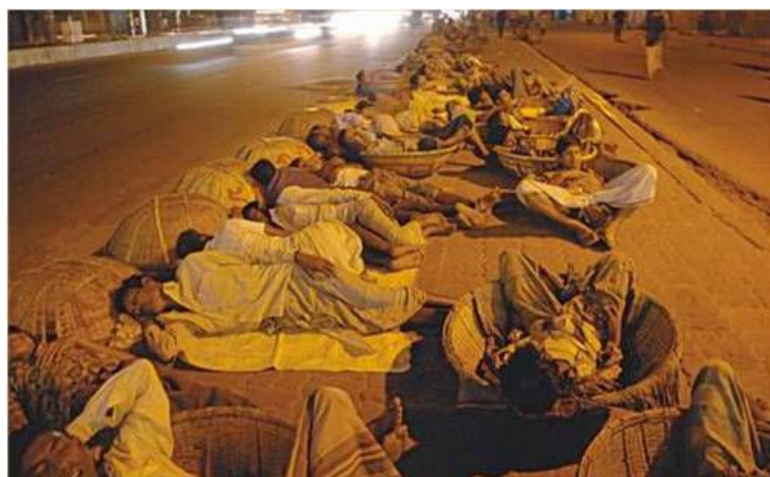
(Executive director of USS, Nilphamari, interviewed on 8 February, 2012)

Migration of the wage-earning male, even marginal farmers, gives households a better chance of reducing the extent of seasonal hunger and even to a larger extent, particularly immediately after the Monga when migrant workers return with their earnings. In a greater context of the urban labour market, Toufique and Turton (2002) stated that the countryside of the northwest region is no longer confined to food production but is now a source of labour for urban areas. However, contradictory findings are also claimed by some researchers. Elahi and Ara (2008) stressed that huge migration during the Monga leads to higher proportions of separation, divorce and resulting social conflict. As a cause they pointed that some people return after the Monga period, but others do not, thus increasing the urban slums. Some migrants get married

and start a new life at their destination. During the fieldwork I found one female-headed household that is a victim of such social dislocation.

“It was three years ago. On *Bhadro* month, my husband decided to go to Dhaka. Some male neighbours usually go there during this time. Three months later, on the first half of the *Agrahayan*, all of the male neighbours returned but my husband did not. Afiz who had gone with my husband gave me some money and told me that my husband had sent it for us. He was pulling rickshaw there. He also told that my husband had decided to stay there for the next few months and then come back when he had saved enough. After five months my husband did not come back or make any contact and I became frustrated. Suddenly one day he showed up. He told me that he got married there and he had decided to divorce me and he did it with the help of the *matbar* (village head). I then went back to my father’s house with my three children.”
(Amela, female, Khadimari, Rowmari, interviewed on 13 November, 2011)

In their rich documentation of case studies, Hossain, Khan and Seeley (2003) showed how poor migrants are treated as outsiders, deprived of entitlements and denied justice at the place of destination. They also found that problems of accommodation (photograph 7.4), sickness and disease, robbery and physical harassment loom large for such seasonal migrants (ibid). Thus, I would say, as a coping migration may be a short term solution in the Monga time, but it does not have any significant outcome for the marginal livelihoods of this region. Therefore, regarding the effectiveness of migration, it is worthwhile to review Hugo’s (1991) observation: “...remittances do not represent the total economic losses or benefits in areas of origin since such elements as transmission of skills, status and experience, flow of ideas, loss of economic and political leaders and social disruption can influence development in the area of origin”.



Photograph 7.4: Common scenario of the capital Dhaka at night. Migrant people having no accommodation sleep on the street day after day.

Source: <http://www.sos-arsenic.net/english/intro/monga.html>

There can be no denial the fact that the well supported GO and NGO programmes and policies can help reduce both seasonal hunger and chronic food insecurity in this region (Akram, 2008; Shahriar and Khalily, 2008) and may also act as good weapons of the poor to cope with hunger. But we have seen that households able to take on GO and NGOs assisted coping strategies, particularly for the Monga period, are very few in number. The recent RIB Report (see, Ali and Ghosh, 2011), summarised this issue by stating three core points: i) government has done little or nothing in a planned way to eradicate the Monga permanently preferring instead to implement ‘safety net’ programmes; ii) NGOs’ activities in averting Monga are sporadic; and, iii) a well organised planning and coordinated strategies of the GO and NGOs are required. Besides, in criticizing the existing anti-Monga programmes⁹⁷ Elahi and Ara (2008) commented that most lack any grounded reality in the problem or a proper understanding of local needs, and they are ignorant of local wisdom, which may be termed the ‘missing area of intervention’. But elsewhere, Campbell *et al.* (1991:74) aptly comment, “that they are not unusual actions taken in time of stress, but are integral components of the rural production system, components which assume greater importance in periods of difficulty.” However, households reported that the performance of NGO activities in recent years has been more satisfactory than GO schemes and households who can utilise the taken loan/credit purposefully or can generate income from the training they got for IGAs are more capable to reduce the negative impact of the Monga. This is well documented in previous researches (see, Conroy and Marks, 2008; Khalily and Latif, 2010).

7.5 Conclusion

Finally, the above discussion of how the poor households cope with the Monga provides further insights into livelihood strategies (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). An important finding is that even though the households are all generally poor, there are considerable variations in the way their coping decisions are made. The effectiveness of the adopted strategies is not hard and fast and there may well dispute about their choice for particular households. Along with the widely adopted consumption-related strategies (as we saw in chapter six), the mix of other strategies for each household also changes year to year according to crisis severity and the household situation, the support they get, and thus their effectiveness is obviously relative. Though some strategies are welfare-enhancing, most are taken only under distress at the risk of destabilizing future livelihoods, for two reasons. First, households are often forced into highly inequitable short-run solutions that deepen their poverty – a point stressed by Chambers, Longhurst, and Pacey (1981). Second, the emergent economic and market constraints (Moris,

⁹⁷ This term is now frequently used in the newspapers, referring to programmes which are specially designed for the Monga mitigation. This term is also found in Monga-related publications (see, Elahi and Ara, 2008; Shamsuddin *et al.*, 2006; Akram, 2008).

1989; Shariar and Khalily, 2008), for example households' behaviour in response to food crisis during the floods, and the coping mechanisms they adopt, are inevitably influenced by their need to survive not only the flood, but also the increases in prices they have to pay for food. Thus, the local coping mechanisms are connected to the wider political and economic system (Watts, 1983; Cannon, 1991). However, the realisation is that the coping strategies have become permanent parts of the entitlement of Monga affected households that increases the risk of trapping people permanently in coping mode (Davise, 1996). But in the context of policy formulation, here I would argue that it is necessary to know how to facilitate those coping responses that have relatively more beneficial effects. Ali (2006b)⁹⁸ in this regard emphasised that Monga-affected people could play the vital role by themselves to eradicate Monga if their capacities and incapacities are taken into account and support is provided accordingly. On the other hand, the persistence of the Monga suggests the need for a lesson in learning about the existing programmes from the affected people. Because, given the severity of seasonal hunger in the Monga within such chronic food insecure region, I argue that policies and programmes to improve both chronic and transitory food security should cover a wide terrain (Sahn, 1989) not only to address the Monga or merely the chronic food insecurity. There is a need to combine seasonally targeted policies/programmes with those aimed at removing the underlying structural causes of endemic poverty and chronic food insecurity (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012) and, in turn, increase the natural resilience of households (Beraki, 2009). I would also add a point that policy priorities should provide households with choices regarding support that contribute to self-determination and autonomy in livelihood strategies (Chang, 2005). The next chapter thus, will review how the existing GO and NGO policies and programmes have been shaped over time in the light of the emerging issues identified in this study and in the context of rethinking the Monga in the northwest region.

⁹⁸ The present research is so far the first research on the Monga which used participatory qualitative methods to aid understanding and find out ways of combating the Monga.

Chapter Eight

Institutional Responses to the Monga: Policies, Programmes and Politics

8.1 Introduction

Like other countries, from a rights-based viewpoint⁹⁹ the government of Bangladesh has the obligation actively to combat food insecurity as one of its major duties to its citizens. The government has ratified all of the major international human rights instruments relevant to the right to food. Food and nutrition have to be a major focus for actors in the development process (Zug, 2006) and the country has done well in managing its food and agricultural policies, especially in those pertaining to liberalization, agricultural research and development, public distribution of food (cited in Titumir and Sawar, 2006) and the markets. In this connection, the poverty alleviation programmes have been acted upon as important interventions in this region to counter the consequences of the Monga. But I would argue here that despite these developmental transformations, the common perception is that the Monga is poverty-related and acute governance problems. Mahmud (2007:3) argues that the Monga is a violation of human basic rights due to a lack of political will and also a matter of social exclusion: “it’s a cause of politics-politics of power”. It can be added that government and donor motivations, goals and actions have often overlapped and various strategies that are already applied for Monga prevention were not specifically designed for the Monga. In line with this, Shalauddin *et al.* (2009) added that success is limited due to poor coordination or linkages to the market. Khandker and Mahmud (2012) argue that the recently launched policy¹⁰⁰ interventions in the region provide a test case of what works and what does not in combating seasonal hunger. Thus, the emphasis of my research now shifts as in this chapter I begin to explore those public policies and programmes seeking to ensure household food security and combat the Monga. In particular, I examine to what extent current policies work in practice and whether current programmes adequately reflect the lived experiences. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the policies adopted by the GO, major NGOs and other

⁹⁹Article 15 of the Bangladeshi constitution states: “it shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to attain, through planned economic growth a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement of the material and cultural standard of living of the people, with a view to securing to its citizens [...] the provision of basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care.” (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; www.pmo.gov.bd/pmolib/constitution/part2.htm accessed on 22.12.2012).

¹⁰⁰ The Sixth Five Year Plan 2011-15 (SFYP) ‘Accelerating Growth and Reducing Poverty’ of the Government of Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh) is the latest comprehensive strategic planning document.

development actors to address food security and the Monga, followed by a discussion of the programmes that are now in practice. The final section then moves on to a discussion of what constraints have influenced the outcomes of the actors' policies and programmes in this region where the interlocking of seasonality and endemic poverty results in severe seasonal hunger. In doing this, I try to keep in mind that the policy, as the word itself implies, is basically the outcome of politics and policy formulation, and that its interpretation and execution are fundamentally political processes (Barracrough, 1991).

The chapter draws on interviews with representatives of government officers, NGOs, community organisations, project personal of donor agencies, researchers and academicians working within field of food security and Monga, findings from a stakeholder meeting of different NGOs and government representatives, and a workshop arranged by the NGOs. Along with this primary information, a series of national policy documents, NGOs annual reports and related literature will also be used in this chapter.

8.2 Policy framework to Monga eradication

The government of Bangladesh has no specific policy document for Monga alleviation. In 2005, after a huge political debate and giving priority to the hunger situation in greater Rangpur, the government put a special focus on the Monga in the country's *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (PRSP) and announced a "holistic approach to social protection [against] anticipated risks such as Monga and seasonal poverty" (PRSP, 2005: 9). In the national strategy for accelerated poverty reduction (Revised for FY 2009-11) paper II, the Monga was recognised as the result of 'lean seasons'. The document states that "the persistence of extreme poverty in some specific geographic locations has been a stark reality in Bangladesh. People living in remote *char* areas with few assets and limited employment opportunities especially during the lean seasons become the usual victims of persistent poverty. Investments in infrastructure, creation of employment opportunities during the lean periods, and increased coverage of social safety nets programmes (SSNPs) will improve the poverty situation of these disadvantaged groups" (PRSP, 2009: 11). As an outcome, strategic plans of action have included:

- Targeting people with threatened livelihoods, hard-core poor people, unemployed people in remote areas like Monga areas, hoar and *char* areas;
- Undertaking job creation programmes in the poverty-prone areas, especially the Monga-prone districts;
- Ensuring the targeting of 100% of seasonal unemployment in Monga and *char* areas;
- Agriculture diversification and land redistribution to the poor;

- Creation of skilled technicians and workers among people from Monga areas;
- Overseas Employment-opportunities for people of Monga-prone areas.

However, in Bangladesh the current national specific policy for promoting food security and nutrition is the National Food Policy (2006) which outlines a comprehensive strategy through increased food availability, food access and nutrition (GoB, 2006). Its Plan of Action (2008 – 2015)¹⁰¹ is a set of prioritized and coordinated actions and targets towards NFP goals (GoB, 2008), while the Country Investment Plan (CIP) 2011¹⁰² states the corresponding investment requirements in line with the Sixth Five Year Plan and the Millennium Development Goals (GoB, 2010). In this document as a plan for *Objective 2: Increased purchasing power and access to food of the people*, a target has been set for increasing the effectiveness of targeted food security programmes and other safety nets. This plan has imposed a greater priority on “improving coverage of vulnerable and disadvantaged people and areas, especially Monga-prone areas” (Shaheen and Islam, 2012: 9). The NFP 2006 (strategy-2.2) stated that ‘access to food from private market for the hard-core poor, who are exposed to severe nutritional risk throughout the year, is inadequate.’ This is especially during the lean season, and so, the government of Bangladesh, therefore, targets the population group, regions and seasons where nutritional stress is most acute through income transfers, targeted food distribution and public works programmes (Mozumder *et al.*, 2009:15). Therefore, the existing food policy considered Monga mitigation through improved targeting, improved cost-effectiveness and enhanced adequacy to vulnerable people’s nutritional needs through social safety nets. But the local government such as at the district, upazila and union *Parishad* level have no separate policy to address the Monga, so they mostly follow the state policy and plans.

Earlier, considering the seasonal poverty due to the agro-ecological constraints of the one-crop area, the seasonality of agriculture in this region got priority in the agriculture policy of Bangladesh. The New Agriculture Extension Policy (NAEP), enacted in 1996, encouraged different actors to work with the existing farmers’ groups instead of individual farmers and

¹⁰¹ The NFP Plan of Action (PoA) translates the provisions of the NFP towards achieving its three core objectives into 26 strategic Areas of Intervention (AoI), priority actions to be undertaken in the short term, medium term and long term over the period 2008-2015, identifies responsible actors (government and non-government) and suggests a set of policy targets and indicators for monitoring progress.

¹⁰² The Bangladesh Country Investment Plan: *A road map toward investment in agriculture, food security and nutrition* (CIP) is a five-year (2011-2015) comprehensive plan that aims to ensure sustainable food security. It is a country-led planning, fund mobilization and alignment tool. It supports increased, effective public investment to increase and diversify food availability in a sustainable manner and improve access to food and nutrition security. Its interventions also aim to mobilize investment by smallholders and other private sector food security actors.

seasonal poverty reduction by agricultural diversification. But it is important to note that the Monga was not to be found in this policy documents. Rather, regionally active agricultural research and development agencies collectively tried to address the issue through a set of innovative technologies interventions, coupled with capacity building and dissemination activities. A leading project named Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance (PETRRA)¹⁰³ had commissioned as many as 11 rice-based research and development projects in this region to combat seasonal and chronic poverty.

During the life of this PETRRA (1999-2004) project, the establishment of a Northwest Focal Area Forum (Figure 8.1) was facilitated that could mobilise all actors active in the region in the field of agricultural R&D and maximize the benefits for small and marginal farmers and on-farm labourers (Salahuddin *et al.*, 2009) as these are the groups most affected by the Monga.

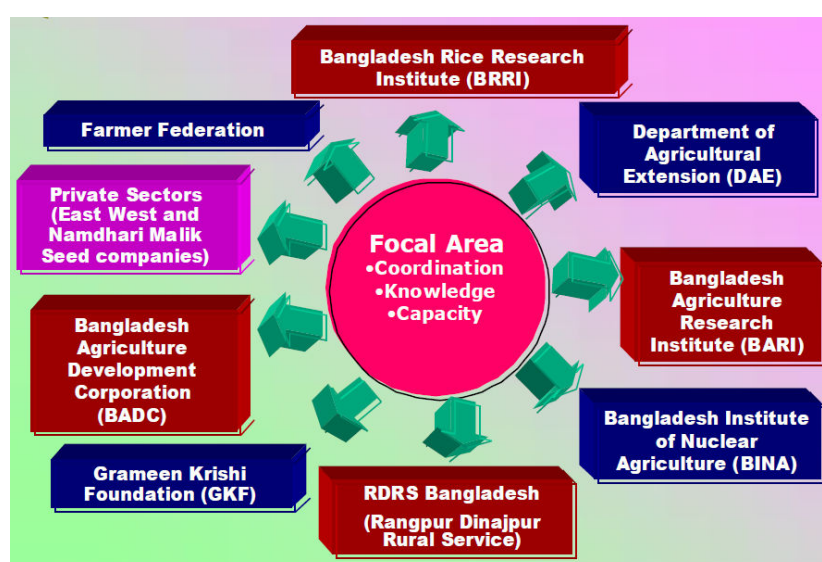


Figure 8.1: Northwest Focal Area Forum, Bangladesh.

Source: Adapted from Salahuddin *et al.*, 2009.

The Northwest Focal Area Forum articulated four objectives for alleviating the Monga (Van Mele *et al.*, 2005):

- identified suitable technologies and fast maturing rice varieties;

¹⁰³ The project was funded by DFID and managed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) with close cooperation from the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI). There was a MoU between the DAE (a government extension agency) and RDRS (an NGO) to ensure a government and civil society partnership for regional development.

- develop capacity of farmers on the above tested technologies on a large scale through GO-NGO field workers;
- access quality seeds of recommended varieties was a high priority;
- strategies for hearing, accommodating and responding to the voice of resource-poor households.

Therefore, this forum provided a platform that utilised local actors working together to combat the seasonality of the Monga through an agricultural development framework.

8.3 Major actors and programmes in Monga eradication

Though the government is the key actor in addressing food insecurity, their involvement in eradication of the Monga is still limited. Different ministries and concerned departments are implementing the different programmes under the national overall development programmes through local level administrations and bodies. We saw in the previous chapter that the GO and NGO-assisted programmes that have responded most proactively to the call for Monga reduction and have tackled the vulnerability of those poor people are the different SSNPs¹⁰⁴. In the long run the GoB is implementing their different core food security and nutritional (i.e. National Nutrition Programme)¹⁰⁵ programmes to cover three essential elements i.e. food availability, access and utilization that are included in the right to food (Shahabuddin, 2010). The government agricultural extension departments and different NGOs are consistently offering long term agricultural development in this region, as we saw in the previous chapters.

The main role is playing mostly are the national and international NGOs and development partners like multi- and bilateral institutions. Not all these organisations are actively involved in combating the Monga and the agendas of most them are predominantly project-based and demonstrative in nature and, somehow do not include the Monga as their prime focus. However, they are working as partner of the government and donor agencies initiative projects and programmes i.e. RDRS, as one of the partner organisation is implementing the WFP-

¹⁰⁴ According to Zohir *et al.*, (2010), close to 70 Government safety net programmes are currently being operated by an extensive network of NGOs and development partners. The key GoB policy documents that relate to safety nets for the poor include: Report of the Task Force on Comprehensive Food Security Policy for Bangladesh, July, 2000; subsequent National Food Policy, January 2001; and National Food Policy 2006; NFP Plan of Action (2008-2015); and the revised Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper II (PRSP II – 2009-2011). The current one is the PRSP – 2011.

¹⁰⁵ The NNP was established in 2001 with World Bank funding as a continuation of the Bank's Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (BINP). The goal of the National Nutrition Project (NNP), which is run by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOH), is to achieve sustainable improvements in the nutritional status of the population (particularly children and women) through the adoption of new behaviours and the appropriate use of the nutrition services which are increasingly managed by local communities. The NNP has been implemented in 105 upazilas in Bangladesh and is being expanded to cover 162 upazilas.

assisted and funded school feeding programmes in the Gaibandha district. Multilateral organisations, such as the WB, UNDP (United Nation Development Programme), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund) and bilateral agencies, such as the DFID and USAID do fund and manage a range of development projects, particularly, helping to drive policy and practice following the establishment of people's rights and the criticism of national policy. Recently, some philanthropic initiatives have also started through individual or collaborative actions in addressing the Monga. A comprehensive list of different actors, directly and indirectly involved in the improvement of the food security situation, poverty reduction and livelihood enhancement of the poor in the northwest region is given in Appendix V. However, the involvement of the NGOs in food security and Monga varies according to internal factors such as links between the concerned government departments and external factors like the donor priorities and the contested roles of state and civil society (Oven, 2009).

NGOs and donor agency programmes¹⁰⁶ for the Monga period are limited to some microcredit and food or cash support and long term social and economic uplift through income generation and skill development. Like the social safety nets, some programmes are implemented through a collaborative approach, for example the IGVGD–TUP (Income Generation for Vulnerable Group Development–Targeting the Ultra-Poor Programme), which is a partnership among the government, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), and WFP (Matin and Hulme, 2003 cited in Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). However, there are some programmes that are geared directly to Monga eradication, for example, the PKSf started a special microcredit programme in 2006 specifically targeted at the Monga-affected extreme poor of the Rangpur region. This is named PRIME (Programmed Initiative for Monga Eradication). Some of the programmes that are not only for the Monga period but are introduced specifically in Monga-prone areas, such as the *Chars* Livelihood Programme, implemented jointly by NGOs and the local government in the *char* areas of greater Rangpur and some adjacent districts. However, the programmes which are particularly designed for the enhancing food and nutrition security and combating the Monga are discussed below in two broad categories: short-term strategies and long-term strategies (Table 8.1).

¹⁰⁶ There is no specific data regarding the total numbers of NGO and donor agency projects and programmes that are being implemented in the northwest region. During my fieldwork, I tried to explore the statistics but failed. When I was in contact with the UP office of Sundarganj union, a UP member mentioned that they themselves have no data. They know how many organisations are working in the UP area but they don't have access to information about how many programmes are being implemented, and who does what. A UP officer also mentioned that due to such lack of information, there is duplication and the overlapping of activities in some rural areas. I found a similar situation in the upazila office of other districts. A local news reporter of Gaibandha district informally informed me that in each of the five districts there are 27 government and 25 non-government programmes active to tackle the Monga.

Table 8.1: Current institutional responses to addressing the Monga.

Types of responses	Major programmes
Short-term Response	Social safety net
	Open Market Sale (OMS) of subsidized food
Long-term Responses	PRIME (Project Based)
	CLP (Project based)
	GFSUPW (Project based)
	Agriculture diversification programmes
	Community <i>Dhan</i> Bank
	Traditional Micro-credit programmes
	NGO driven other long term social programmes
	Awareness raising programmes

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011- March, 2012.

8.3.1 Short-term strategies

In the previous chapter I have already discussed the major short-term programmes offered by GOs and NGOs which are taken by the households to reduce the impact of the Monga on their livelihoods and food intake (see, Table 7.4). However, apart from those programmes there are a number of other SSNPs and SPs in Bangladesh (Appendix VI). Each of the programmes has separate stated objectives, yet there is one common element – the reduction of vulnerability against crisis (i.e. disaster, price hike etc). Other than in transformative cases, outcomes of these programmes can be grouped into three purposes/functions that the objectives serve. These are:

- i) *Prevention*: some outcomes reduce the probability of incidence of shocks. Example: making cluster village for the landless poor;
- ii) *Mitigation*: Improve the households' resource endowment such that the hardship of a shock when it does occur is reduced. Example: beneficiaries of FFW are likely to be less affected by food price hikes; and,
- iii) *Coping*: Help reduce the everyday hardships and impoverishments of those adversely affected by shocks as well as those who are more permanently poor or destitute. Examples include, VGF and Relief.

The data from the Bangladesh HIES data (2011) suggests that the increased public attention given to the Monga may have begun to be translated into increased safety-net coverage in Rangpur. Thus, in 2010-11 the proportion of households covered by at least one safety-net programme was found to be about 35 percent in the Rangpur region compared with the

previously cited national-level figure of 25 percent (BBS, 2011: 74–75). Yet such programmes do not explain more than 1.6% of GDP in Bangladesh (Rahman and Choudhury, 2012). The incidence of multiple membership seems to be lower in Rangpur, and the average monthly benefits per beneficiary household are also lower (by about 20 percent) compared with those for the country as a whole. In fact, the Rangpur region still falls slightly behind the rest of the country in the coverage of programmes with year-round benefits, such as allowances for old people and destitute women (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). The higher overall safety-net coverage in Rangpur seems to be largely explained by programmes with extremely small short-term or one-time benefits (mainly, gratuitous relief). The expanded coverage of safety nets in Rangpur may thus have been driven in part by a kind of populist tokenism (ibid). However, some social safety net programmes which are not for the Monga period; rather, offered year-round benefit for the poor also cover the hunger situation during the Monga.

Apart from providing the direct food or cash transfers, the form of short-term intervention most likely to increase access to food is the open market sale (OMS) of selected food items like rice, lentils, and wheat at reduced price for selected amounts (Photograph 8.1). Usually one person can buy 5 kg per item. It has been mentioned before (see chapters five and seven) that usually the price of food is almost stable during the Monga unless a flood hits, but it is true that a food price crisis sets a new challenge in the sense that it is a crisis that emerges from market-related issues. Other than the OMS run by the GOB, there is no programme to deal exclusively with shocks arising from market failures. This programme is very popular with the poor. However, *char* households criticized the current OMS programme by mentioning that it is never operated in their *char* villages.



Photograph 8.1: Government initiated open market sale.

Source: <http://business-and-economy-bd-and-world.blogspot.co.uk>

8.3.2 Long term programmes

During the field work I found that the long-term anti-Monga programmes are very limited (Table 8.1). However, some programmes (photograph 9.2) that are perceived by the actors as interrelated to Monga eradication are traditional micro credit programmes, social and economic awareness raising programmes. Besides, the government of Bangladesh considers agriculture, food security and nutrition to be major priorities. The Country Investment Plan (CIP) provides a coherent set of 12 priority investment programmes to improve national food security and nutrition situation in an integrated way, that is also contributing in combating the Monga to some extents (Shaheen and Islam, 2012), but not to handle the Monga on its own.

“Each government has its own plans and programmes. Failure of successive programme implementation is the root cause of food insecurity. Monga in the Greater Rangpur is no exception. It is important to identify appropriate policies for understanding the extent of the seasonal poverty vis-à-vis chronic poverty. But the Monga needs specific programmes.”

(Professor Dara Samsuddin, The first initiator of the *Dhan Bank*, 2012)



Photograph 8.2: NGOs offered different programme. Top left a participant of the CLP programme is showing his grocery shop established through asset transfers. Top right, the photo shows participation in FFW programme. Bottom left is a raised house plinth and bottom right shows skill training for IGA.

Source: Field work, October 2011- March, 2012.

As we said before (section 8.3) that with a specific aim to combat the Monga, in 2006 the PKS¹⁰⁷, the country's premier wholesale MFI, and a central institution committed to poverty alleviation, introduced a major microfinance programme—the PRIME. The programme contains elements of both short and long run measures. Short run measures are oriented towards mitigating Monga, and therefore aiming to solve immediate problems of food scarcity, while long run measures are for creating options for permanent income and employment opportunities so that vulnerability to the Monga is reduced (Khalily and Latif, 2010). During the Monga season, PRIME provides emergency loans for consumption smoothing and cash for work related to local infrastructure development. But the main advantage of this loan is that unlike regular microfinance, PRIME offers microcredit to the ultra-poor and other services on flexible terms. The interest rate is about 10 per cent, compared with 20 percent for other regular microfinance and no fixed savings or weekly meetings are stipulated. PKS¹⁰⁷ has also introduced a programme for migrant workers targeting people from the Monga areas. However, PRIME does not offer consumption credit without either subsequent or prior production credit (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). At present, 16 POs (partner organisations)¹⁰⁸ covering 347 unions of Greater Rangpur region are implementing activities and up to June 2011, PRIME organised 321,633 beneficiaries in the North (PKS¹⁰⁷ Annual Report, 2012).

Another long term intervention in the geographically targeted programmes is the CLP¹⁰⁹. This programme is not designed for the Monga, but considering the disadvantages of the *char* areas and its proneness to the disasters and the Monga, the CLP aims to halve extreme poverty in the Jamuna *chars* of northwest region and aims to improve the livelihoods of over one million people by 2016. The CLP's centrepiece activity is the asset transfer programme mainly livestock (i.e cow), including an 18 month cash stipend worth a total of approximately BD

¹⁰⁷ Though instituted by the Government, legally PKS¹⁰⁷ is a "company limited by guarantee" meaning "company not for profit" and it is registered under the Companies Act of 1913/1994 with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies. The legal structure of PKS¹⁰⁷ allows flexibility, authority and power to take programmes and implement them throughout the country and managing its affairs as an independent organization. PKS¹⁰⁷ currently provides loanable funds to 195 POs (Partner organisations— three big and 192 small and medium) under its four mainstream credit programmes: Rural Microcredit; Urban Microcredit; Microenterprise credit and Microcredit for the Hardcore Poor.

¹⁰⁸ Although 16 POs are involved in implementation, essentially four POs are assigned with around sixty percent of the responsibilities. The Rangpur-based RDRS, having long experience with extensive network in the region, have been assigned with the task of mobilizing almost one-fifth of the total targeted PRIME households. The three other major institutions are ESDO, SKS and UDDIPAN.

¹⁰⁹ Originally proposed in 1996 as a livestock development project, the CLP began operations in late 2004. The CLP is jointly funded by UKaid through the DIFD and the Australian Government (AusAID), sponsored by the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division of the Government of Bangladesh's Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives, and implemented through Maxwell Stamp Plc. The first phase of the CLP (CLP-1) ran between 2004-2010, and worked on the *chars* in the districts of Kurigram, Bogra, Gaibandha, Sirajgonj and Jamalpur. CLP-1 targeted 55,000 of the poorest households. CLP-2 began in April 2010 and follows on from CLP-1, but continue to work in Kurigram, Gaibandha and Jampalpur, as well as the new districts of Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Pabna and Tangail. CLP-2 will run until 2016 with the aim of lifting 67,000 households out of extreme poverty (http://www.clp-bangladesh.org/over_view.php)

TK. 20000, roughly one year's household income which provides investment assets to poor households.

“CLP is not working directly for the Monga alleviation, but the knock-on effects of household economic improvements and empowerment is considerable. The most important contribution I think, is that the beneficiaries have got a platform to face the hardships of their livelihood. They are now more capable to find out suitable own ways of resource generation, I mean they are becoming self depended.

(Mr Alauddin Ali, Executive director of USS, interviewed, Niphamari, 2011).

In an evaluation report of the first phase of CLP, Marks and Islam (2009) showed that families recruited early in the programme are showing significant economic improvements, with 90% of these households having assets valued at over Tk. 25,000 and their respective incomes also nearly doubling. Different actors recognise that the CLP has achieved some considerable milestones in reducing extreme poverty in the *char* areas (Panetta and Conroy, 2011).

One of the leading food security projects in the northern region is the Gaibandha Food Security Project for Ultra Poor Women (GFSUPW)¹¹⁰, the ultimate objective of which is to improve the livelihoods of ultra poor women and their dependants by targeting 40,000 women-headed households. Regarding the facing the Monga, the head of GFSUPW in RDRS Mr Md Nazrul Ghani said:

“This is a very different sort of project from other micro-credit based programmes where destitute women are the sole beneficiary. Beneficiary women are now becoming self capable (not fully) to generate income by which they are trying income smoothing during the Monga. It is true that still it is not fully successful in terms of poverty eradication due to other interrelated social and political factors. The project also does not cover other Monga affected areas and it is a time bound project.”

(Interviewed, Gaibandha, 2012)

During my field work I found that most of the leading NGOs like BRAC, GUK, TMSS, Islamic Relief (IR) and RDRS had key programmes for long run poverty reduction in micro-credit, which is yet to be recognised as an important tool for reaching the poorest. Among the other NGOs during the fieldwork I found that ASA, a leading NGO sometimes offers loans interest-free in special cases (ASA local office of Gangachar Union, 2012). I also found an interesting scenario that although all of the NGOs who operate both micro-credit and social programmes demand that their social programmes are open for all of the poor, in reality, the

¹¹⁰ The project started in 2009 and will be completed in 2013. The Funding Partners are: EU, ICCO, the Netherlands, Dark and Light and TLM –I. The project has been run by a consortium of seven national partners. The project has been implementing the following activities to achieve its objectives and overall goal: food Security, income generating capacity, disaster and risk preparedness, life skills, and advocacy and social mobilisation.

credit and the social programmes are highly interconnected. For example, the participants in credit programmes are most likely to derive benefit from social programmes, except for the Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) programmes. The simple mechanism and credit constraints perceived by the affected households were discussed earlier in chapter 5.

Partnering with various international agencies, all of the leading and local NGOs (see, Appendix V) are carrying major interventions targeting employment generation, livelihood development, enhancing resilience, disseminating nutritional knowledge, disaster management, agricultural research and technical support, agro and social forestry, and so on. “It is true that most of the NGOs regular social development programmes’ focus areas are mostly the same” (Alauddin Ali, Executive director, USS, Nilphamari, interviewed, 2012). Another point is:

“Most of the programmes are designed for addressing the root causes of hunger and malnutrition, trying to eradicate permanent poverty in the long run. Though in the short run yet they seem inadequate and not for the Monga, but if successful such long term interventions will hopefully help to some extent erase the impact of the Monga from greater Rangpur.”
(Chairman, Bangladesh NGO Foundation, Dhaka, 2012)

A few NGOs like RIB, RDRS, CARE, USS, Action aid are working through a ‘Rights Based’ approach for poor landless farmers, women and indigenous peoples in accessing land and other productive resources, HIV/AIDs prevention and climate change issues. Recently some NGOs are trying to create awareness through posters and campaign movements (Photographs 8.3). For example, with the purpose of scaling up Monga mitigation efforts both in the field and at the policy level, the *Monga* Mukta Bangladesh (MMB) Secretariat, a joint initiative of Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) and ActionAid, Bangladesh (AAB), launched a grand caravan in 2009 from Dhaka to Gaibandha travelling to some of the Monga-affected districts. The MMB ended up



Photograph 8.3: Different awareness rising posters of GO and NGOs programmes.

Source: Fieldwork, October, 2011 – March, 2012.

adopting the “Gaibandha Declaration” at a large gathering. The Declaration mostly focused on a paradigm shift from a relief-oriented approach to an action-based approach aimed at a sustainable solution to the Monga. “We don't fear the Monga, we don't fear poverty” – this was the slogan that was echoed over and over again and that was the net gain of the Monga *Muktir Michhil* (Rally for escaping the Monga).

From the above description, it is abundantly clear that within the policy framework, the different actors have instigated very inadequate and limited programmes for combating the Monga as most of them targeted programmes. However, questions still abound: are there any significant gaps and duplication as still there are some programmes on the ground? Are all critical risks and vulnerabilities being addressed? Is programme proliferation merely spreading ‘tokenism’? Are sustainable results being promoted? The following section I will move to some missing links in policy formulations and programme implementation in Monga eradication in the context of the perceived household and actors’ experiences.

8.4 Politics in actors’ actions: Issues and facts

Elsewhere, studies of programme plans and practice around the world have shown that commonly there are large differences between what is planned and what happens in the field and the “implementation gaps” are often very great in developing countries (Grindle, 1980; Turner & Hulme, 1997). De Janvry and Subramanian (1993) identified three basic forces that determined the barriers in policy and programme effectiveness: the political and economic constraints; electoral politics, bureaucratic behaviours and rent-seeking; and lobbies and pressure group politics. Andersen (1993) argued that the actors’ inability to design and implement cost-effective policies and programmes is often attributed to ‘politics’. He further added a point that if programmes and policies are designed and implemented with little or no regard for the preferences of the target households¹¹¹ and the economic, social and cultural constraints within which decisions are made, the results are likely to be disappointing. It is true that along with lacking a particular policy to address the Monga, there are serious resource constraints that often prevent the government from launching proper programmes without donor assistance and guidance (the annual budget of Bangladesh shows how badly the government depends upon foreign aid¹¹²) but the question yet remains of the varied effectiveness of other partners like NGOs and donor agencies working in the same field with

¹¹¹ Earlier Drèze and Sen (1989) stated that ‘public’ in food and nutrition policy and programmes are essentially seen not merely as ‘the patient’ whose well being commands attention, but also as ‘the agent’ whose actions can transform society.

¹¹² Bangladesh was the 22nd largest recipient of official humanitarian aid in 2010 and received the equivalent of 1.6% of its gross national income (GNI) as aid. The total amount of aid was 1.4 billion US dollars (<http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/countryprofile/bangladesh>)

huge investments. During the field work I found that GO and NGO officials often criticise each other. As we have seen, the current government PRSP emphasizes the Monga largely as an exercise in delivering resources to the Monga-affected poor for a certain period either by trickle-down or through the conventional approach of targeted aid. This bypasses the issue of power and justice (Sobhan, 1999), leading some NGOs officials to criticise the government saying that poverty has been created and promoted because the government doesn't have any long term strategies to eradicate the root causes of poverty. On the other hand, government officials frequently blame the NGOs, saying they are exploitative through the medium of microcredit by which the poor remain poor and become trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and debt. Questions also hang around agricultural development and commercialisation, land reforms, labour, commodity and credit markets through which households can increase and stabilize food intakes. The following sub-sections discuss some of the core politics that affect different stages in policy and programme implementation with an indication of the existing gaps in addressing the Monga.

8.4.1 Some leakages of the programmes features

Currently the government focus in addressing the Monga is mainly on coping-based approaches such as safety nets. These very limited programmes have been designed as risk-reduction approaches (social protection). Ahmed (2007) argued that current poverty reduction programmes are not diversified enough to match the particular local realities of poverty and to some extent, they have not been conceptualized from a social knowledge base. Historically, public safety net efforts in Bangladesh have clustered around the twin themes of food rations and post-disaster relief. The third cluster has been informal safety nets at family and community levels to address issues of demographic and social shocks. Over time, safety nets have transcended and have graduated to a mainstream social and developmental concern (Rahman and Choudhury, 2012). However, it is argued that transfer payments or relief help for the poor in the short term do not by themselves trigger sustainable income growth (Elahi and Ara, 2008). Most of the programmes seem to be providing temporary poverty-alleviation impacts and they are short lived and may cease implementation before achieving any impact, for example, the PRIME programmes excluded an income generating component in 2011 (PKSF, 2012).

There are serious gaps in programme coverage as most safety net programmes address economic vulnerability but pay little attention to demographic vulnerability. The demographically vulnerable include children, the elderly, and those who are severely disabled or chronically ill. Some elderly male-headed households who are unable to earn and are highly vulnerable to the Monga have no option to get more support from the current programme

except the very little amount of old-age allowance. Women are targeted in special SSNP programmes which are giving them to some extent economic solvency but there is a conspicuous absence of effort at re-evaluating rural women's actual productive roles and the process of alienation from productive assets which push women into less productive and marginalised roles. There are important food and nutrition security issues that remain unattended by the existing programmes, such as diet change and its nutritional consequences, health-related shocks, and social violence (Zohir *et al.*, 2010). Quite interestingly, the detail breakdown in the budget allocations for SSN identify four broad groups: cash transfers/grants; food transfers, several sub-groups of miscellaneous programme (including microcredit, the newly introduced 100 days employment programme and several project-specific activities), and programmes in development sectors. We may also note that education has been addressed as a development sector, but programmes in the health sector have been completely left out of the SSN/SPs in spite of the widely acknowledged recognition that health shocks are at the root of sliding down to poverty (ibid); and safety nets could find more effective meanings if such shocks could be prevented. Regarding income smoothness Khandker *et al.* (2012) argued that “consumption shortfall is a year-round problem caused more by low income and low productivity than by transitory seasonal fluctuations in income. Thus, if interventions that are not geared toward enhancing income and productivity throughout the year or are not adequate enough they are perhaps not much help in containing the Monga in the greater Rangpur region on a sustained basis.” Moreover, the development benefits of some programmes such as FFE and FFW are questionable. Participants of different FGD sessions across all the villages reported that FFW builds an extensive network of rural roads but their quality is largely unsatisfactory (although the nature of FFW has recently changed from simple earthen infrastructure to compact earthen roads or black-topped feeder roads). In other words, these outcome-based programmes meet their consumption support objectives but not development objectives.

We have seen that a major focus in the policy framework for Monga alleviation is through agricultural development and diversification. Agricultural growth is critical for increasing food grain availability and creates employment by advanced agricultural practices such as SDR varieties. Initiatives on SDR varieties which have the greatest potentiality to eradicate Monga through employment generation need to address some issues relating to widespread adaptation, input support and technological assistance (as we saw in the previous chapter).

“The wage labourers do not get any benefit during the Monga unless the medium and large farmers, who mostly used hired agricultural labourers, adopt these varieties. Because, if the variety is cultivated only by the small and marginal farmers who have sufficient idle and surplus labour, they will use their

family labour and thus, little or no employment will be generated for the hired labourers.”

(RDRS agriculture specialist, Rangpur, 2012)

Holmes *et al.* (2008:2) stated that “because of their vulnerability to various risks, the poorest in Bangladesh face limitations in exploring the potential of agriculture to enhance their livelihoods. These are: i) actual and perceived risk to investing in new, possibly more remunerative, agricultural technologies and activities; ii) vulnerability to shocks and stresses and limited ability to mitigate or cope with these; iii) lack of access to capital and labour supply; and, iv) limited access to information and voice to address exclusion.” Thus, the question is whether the technology will be adopted by the medium and large farmers or not. In agricultural policy in Bangladesh it is well documented that increased agricultural production increases revenue and welfare particularly for marginal farmers and the non-farm poor (see, GoB Plan of Action, 2008-2015). But in the context of this northwest regional current socio and economic development situation (see, chapter one and three) in many cases, for marginal scale farmers with relatively small amounts of land and small marketable surpluses, accessing secondary and tertiary markets becomes cost ineffective. In this regard, we have seen that land reform has been considered the most important agenda item in the PSRP document and is also included as a programme into the PRIME to the Monga alleviation¹¹³ though in practice there is a very limited or no progress. In line with Rigg (2006: 196), here I argue that for poverty alleviation in the rural areas, redistributive land reform does not offer a solution for two reasons: first, “because the nature and direction of growth is progressively eroding the central role of land in rural livelihoods, as outlined above. And second, because for land redistribution to have any marked effect it would have to be sufficiently deep to give landless rural dwellers a plot of sufficient size to sustain livelihoods at an acceptable level—rather than just consigning them to rural poverty, but on the land”. He further added a point that “even deep land reform may satisfy rural needs for just a generation before the reproduction of the household and rural population growth causes the same issues of land shortages and livelihood deficiencies to resurface” (ibid). However, recognition of the credit worthiness of small-scale farmers is yet to be adequately reflected in the policies and practices of the formal agricultural lending agencies. We have seen in the chapter 5 and chapter 7 that small and marginal farmers have the limited access to the institutional credit that results in monopolization of loans from agricultural lending institutions by better off male farmers. Agro-processing facilities are also grossly insufficient. Agricultural product markets are either disintegrated or loosely integrated, which partly explains unreasonably high price differentials particularly for non-rice crops.

¹¹³ Some earlier researches for example, Elahi and Ara (2008), Ali (2006b) and Samsuddin *et al.* (2006) claimed that land reform aiming at target oriented land allocation and redistribution of newly developed/or khas land to the landless people could be of help for the poverty alleviation in the Monga-prone areas to a greater extent. Taking an example from Philippines, Elahi and Ara (2008) proposed the establishing of a Land Bank in this regard.

Moreover, small-scale growers have limited access to government-run procurement centres. These limit market outlets. Agricultural input (e.g. seeds, chemical fertilizers) supply systems remain insufficiently developed and are unable to maintain steady supplies of good quality inputs at the doorsteps of farmers, especially in remote *char* areas. It is true that during the last decade public sector agricultural research and extension systems have become reasonably developed in Bangladesh, and they provide the bulk of research and extension services to the farmers, but farming in risk-prone, complex and diverse eco-systems particularly in the *char* land areas is yet insignificant or modest at best (Forum, 2007). Space for male producers is more than their female counterparts although ‘mainstreaming women’ has been picked up by policy makers as the strategy for integrating women into the development process.

We have seen that as partner of the government and also as separate body, the NGOs are operating both a number of short term to long term programmes for direct or indirect Monga alleviation through poverty reduction and sustainable development. There is no denying the fact that participation in the NGO programmes, be it social or credit, improves the living conditions of the poor, although the statistical figures on the per cent of population below the poverty line in this region¹¹⁴ demonstrate only a modest impact of various NGO programmes on the overall poverty alleviation efforts.¹¹⁵ As a possible cause, Ahmed (2007) argued that the external forces (funding agencies) may re-route those NGO routines or programmes for poverty reduction which might not be effective. Newaz (2003: 38) pointed out that “there is a trend to professionalism replacing the volunteer spirit ... professionalism is a direct response to effectiveness, and efficiency needs which makes the NGOs deviate from people’s desired change to the NGOs’ agenda”. In fact, of late there has been a growing concern that NGO interventions do not reach the poorest of the poor households through existing programmes because existing saving and credit programmes are designed for the moderately poor who can repay loans on weekly basis – this was highlighted by an international NGO in its Bangladesh country policy document in January 1996 (see, NOVIB report on Bangladesh, 1996).

Moreover, existing micro-credit programmes are hugely criticised. Evidence shows that the current credit transfer systems offered by the NGOs, even the famous micro-credit, are not

¹¹⁴ The national Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2011 reveals that the Rangpur Division has the highest incidence of poverty (estimated of Head Count Rates by division) at 42.3%.

¹¹⁵ Sen (1998) has termed it a mismatch between “micro-success” and “macro-failure” of poverty alleviation. For a thorough and provoking analysis of this issue see Sen (1998).

fully effective in reducing the extreme forms of food deprivation during the Monga¹¹⁶. Similar indications are to be found in a World Bank recent publication (see, Khandker and Mahmud, 2012): “the results for Rangpur show that the likelihood of poor households experiencing starvation during Monga is reduced by 10 percent by the presence of microcredit programmes in a village, whereas the results derived from the countrywide surveys show that the incidence of extreme poverty is reduced by more than 5 percentage points among households living in a village with a branch of the Grameen Bank.” The same study showed that there is a pronounced seasonality in the microcredit operation of regular programmes of the leading microfinance providing NGOs, and even under the PKSf (Figure 8.2), so that disbursement is lower during the monga season compared with other seasons.

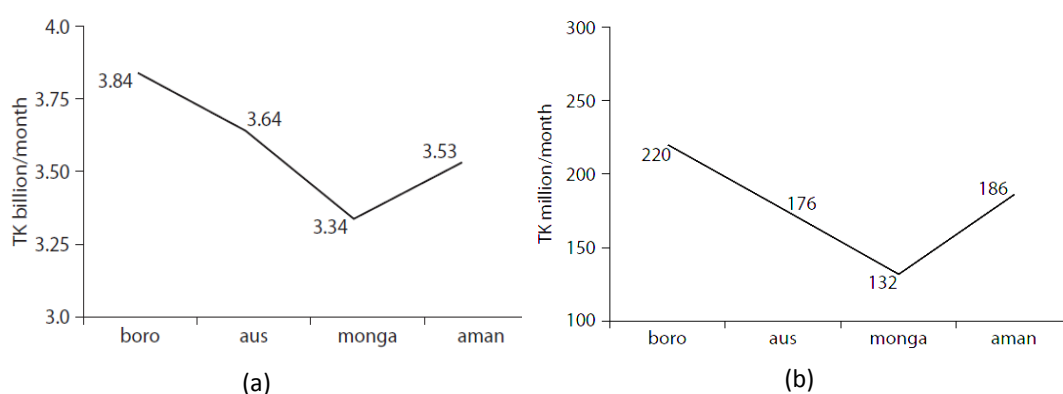


Figure 8.2: Seasonal pattern of microcredit disbursements under (a) regular rural microcredit programmes; and (b) PRIME

Source: Khandker and Mahmud, 2012.

(a) Estimated from unpublished data of PKSf. Figure shows five-year average from 2004/05 to 2008/09.

(b) Estimated from unpublished data of PKSf. Fig. shows disbursement between March 2010- February 2011.

Note: The seasons are *Boro* (March–May), *aus* (June–August), *Monga* (September–November), and *Aman* (December–February).

The low disbursement in the Monga season may reflect fewer opportunities for starting income-generating activities in that season. The question is why NGOs disbursement less in the Monga season while micro-credit is their thrust programme. During the field work I heard contradictory comments from NGO officials and households.

“I need a loan during the Monga to use for making some petty trade; but the *Apa* (NGO female officer/worker) says they have no scheme during this time. If I do not get help when I cannot earn and eat; why do I need a loan at other times?”

(Bashir Hossain, male, Akaluganj Bazar, Nilphamari Sadar, interviewed on 10 November, 2011)

¹¹⁶ In a national seminar on 'Microfinance for hardcore poor: opportunities and challenges', organised by the PKSf in 2005, Dr Yunus, known as the pioneer of micro-finance said that “Micro-credit alone cannot eliminate Monga” (<http://www.sos-arsenic.net/english/intro/monga.html>).

“You know during the Monga the poor have no alternative income sources. They starve for cash to provide food. We know they seek loans by saying it is for income generation, but they never start anything at that time. Inevitably they use the loan to meet their family’s basic needs.”

(Mr Nazrul Gani, Head of the GFSUPW of RDRS, interviewed, 2012)

Therefore, a relationship of distrust is formed between the provider and the beneficiary. Moreover, regarding the context of the Rangpur region, I argue that households who take the loan as microcredit¹¹⁷ use the cash for simple commodity production (for example, poultry or opening a grocery shop), but not for extended commodity reproduction. Thus, the surplus they produce is mainly for their own consumption and it is very hard for them to accumulate capital. Though rural women have made an informal sector through the micro-credit process during the last decade, due to continued involvement with micro-credit most of rural poor are trapped not only in a subsistence trap but also in a mortality trap. Earlier research evidence also showed (see, Rahman and Razzaque, 2000) that the extremely poor do not want loans in the first place because they don’t feel themselves capable of making effective use of them and thus fear running into debt; but they do want to participate in social programmes. Whatever the case, recent evidences show that the expansion of micro-credit has reached a state where further expansion will not be easy (Osmani, *et al.*, 2011). In the same line, Khandker and Mahmud (2012) argued that micro-credit has not proved to be primarily a vehicle for addressing seasonality. Therefore, I suggest that as the investment focus on addressing the Monga has gradually moved into supporting development generally, the dilemma has remained of how to support peoples’ efforts at self reliance or financing physical structures.

However, we have seen that within the gap of the trickle-down mechanism in Monga alleviation, the NGOs eventually led a variety of participatory social development programmes for different welfare concerns. Since most often the hardcore poor are unwilling to participate in loan programmes, this results in their not being able to access to other social programmes because, as we have seen earlier, these are highly inter-linked with the micro-credit programmes. This, in the first place, acts as a stumbling block for the participation of extremely poor households. Rahman and Razzaque (2000) argue that the NGOs do not have any vision about sustainable solutions for the uplift of the ultra poor as they have assumed that this group will automatically benefit from their mainstream programmes. Things have not moved in that direction if we see the existing place vulnerabilities by which poverty, hunger and the Monga are being produced and reproduced over time and the burdens of the households are faced during the Monga (as we discussed in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7). The social

¹¹⁷ According to the InM survey, about 62 percent of the ultrapoor in the northwest region’s five districts participate in some form of microfinance. Of these, 29 percent are PRIME participants, whereas 33 percent participate in regular microfinance. However, the annual growth rate of participation among the ultrapoor is much lower for regular microfinance (3.3 percent) than for PRIME (11.2 percent).

exclusion of some individuals in rural areas is also prominent due to the set target criteria (who are not eligible for take part in their programmes for set criteria; for example, a disabled young male who is the only earning member, has to beg. Even the NGO and community initiative *Dhan* bank in Laxmichap union of Nilphamari, though it is a good example of recent community involvement for a solution to alleviate the Monga, its success meets only part of the total requirement of the Monga-stricken people in Laxmichap union. In the previous chapter we also saw some constraints that are associated with the *Dhan* bank, and here I would say that the requirements of the people are well beyond of the scope of the *Dhan* Bank project to satisfy. The *Dhan* bank is offering a service of a relief nature without considering its members' other social and economic development. It does not consider the power of access to market in normal times through which poor members accumulate year-round savings. However, within the scope of the project, there are still some areas that can be improved.

The NGOs do not plan for long term volatility at the population level. That's why they cannot cope within their programmes with ecological change in their work area. It is rare to make programmes through cumulative research. That is why the programmes are not empirically generalized and consistent with households' changing circumstances. For example, one of the participants (Halima, female, 48 years, Rowmari, 2011) in the FGD session claimed that two years ago when she was displaced from her *char* to another district due to riverbank erosion, she did not get any benefit from the CLP programme later on, even though she was a member. As she was not included as a beneficiary in her new district because she was not on the list of the providing NGO there. Therefore, NGOs offered programmes often miss treating the affected household's immediate changing social life and raised constraints while the project is running. Strategically, I would argue that as in the existing policy and strategy documents, the Monga issue is not so clear or informative, thus restricting NGOs, even government attention towards suitable solutions/interventions in this regard. The consensus is about objectives and, to a growing extent, proper policy and programme design.

8.4.2 Some leakage in programmes implementations

The government uses media to show that their programmes are successfully tackling the Monga. The governmental National News Agency of Bangladesh BSS, in recent years has quoted official sources during the Monga as saying that "adequate steps taken by the government (in the form of an) adequate supply of food grains helped the poor to overcome the Monga in all districts of greater Rangpur" (www.bssnewes.net, 2006). The government is satisfied with the arrangement because it reduces the chances of political unrest (Dayel, 1997). However, during my field work I found that there is mixed reaction regarding the GoB and NGO performance in implementation of programmes.

Proper targeting of the beneficiaries is the crucial problem to deliver services to the affected poor. Generally, the Union Parishad, the lowest tier of the local government, is involved in identifying and selecting beneficiaries of major safety-net programmes. The upazila relief and rehabilitation officer of Nilphamari pointed out to me that:

“In most cases beneficiary lists are prepared quite quickly, so sufficient time normally is not given to identify the genuinely distressed poor. UP Chairmen and members do not select beneficiaries according to government guidelines. They also show negligence to the tag officers in VGD programme.”
(Interviewed, Nilphamari, 2012)

He also pointed out that it is necessary to give priority to new beneficiaries over previous beneficiaries but this often goes wrong. Zohir *et al.*, (2010) argued that selection error may be curtailed when the programmes are largely self-targeted. In self-targeted programmes owned by the government and where the choice of beneficiaries is implemented by responsible (and accountable) local body, the chance of success is high (ibid). Even, the 100 day programme, which was hastily launched in September 2008, lacked any such guidelines and as a result performed much worse, in terms of targeting¹¹⁸. It is frequently alleged that this relatively low level of outreach to the extremely poor is largely due the absence of clear guidelines on how to identify this group. Corroborating this argument, the relief and rehabilitation officer of Nilphamari acknowledged a lack of clarity of the implementation guidelines of the 100 day programmes as to whether the extremely poor alone are to be targeted. However, though it's very unusual, in some programmes offered by the NGOs there is misconduct in the exclusion of the really deprived poor. Giving an example, Mr Nazrul Gani, head of the GFSUPW of RDRS said:

“In this project, some real ultra poor women have missed in the list due to some unavoidable circumstances such as when we made list maybe they had migrated somewhere else. They came back when we started the activities. But we had no option to include them after the project started. Sometimes a non poor household may be included in a programme which is designed and targeted for the extremely poor, or an extremely poor household may not be included in a particular programme.”
(Interviewed, RDRS, Gaibandha, 2012)

Participants of the different FGD sessions reported on the same lines that sometimes NGO workers are more interested in forming groups of the relatively better-off poor as they know from this group they can recover loans by the credit programme. Since the hardcore poor are

¹¹⁸ A household could not be included in the list of beneficiaries since one or more members of the household 'participate in other NGOs'. The exclusion principle being applied is normally imposed by higher-up agency who implements through NGOs; and the later normally claims to engage with their members. It would therefore be contradictory to include a household as a beneficiary of an NGO-run programme which cannot be a 'NGO member'; and coining the term 'other' does eliminate that inconsistency on record (Zohir *et al.*, 2010: 7).

already excluded, this further acts as a barrier to their participation in the other social programmes. Rahman and Razzaque (2000) stated that NGO workers have not encouraged the participation of the poorest of the poor despite the fact such efforts could have been instrumental in bringing these households under the ambit of NGO activities.

Regarding the food grain that the households get through SSNs, it is variable in quality, quantity and type. Generally, the beneficiaries do not want wheat. When I interviewed different beneficiaries, they clearly explained their preference for rice. Thus, in the VGD programme, the distribution of wheat in the context of Bangladesh seems to be irrelevant as most of the people of this country are habituated to rice. Though there is a fixed amount that they should get, some beneficiaries use VGD wheat (Fortified Atta) as meal for their cattle as it is mixed with *Bhushi*. Sometimes people sell the wheat they are given at a low price in the market.

During my fieldwork I observed that there is a lack of coordination among different officials working in different capacities at the union level. There are a number of government officials tagged with SSN programme operation, but their job descriptions relating to these programmes are not clearly defined. Besides, since liberation in 1971, each government has made attempts to alter the local government structure, but their interventions have ended up in intensifying the control of central government. This has created a very dominant central power structure. Almost unconsciously, Bangladeshi society has become an individualistic society with an inherent acceptance of authoritarianism (Gauvreau and Mendis, 1992). It has already been stated in a previous chapter that it is an open secret that UP Chairmen/members take money in exchange of selecting VGF or VGD beneficiaries (see, chapter four for an example). However, the card holders in question did not admit this openly. Apart from this, all of the promised programme benefits do not reach the beneficiaries as they are appropriated along the distribution channel. One participant in an FGD session said that “there are lot of middlemen involved to distribute food or cash. They are mostly the UP chairman’s lobby or political party’s members” (Male, 43 Years old, Gangachara, 2012). Stating such problems, Rahman and Chowdhury (2012: 100) argued that two types of leakage and governance problems remain serious: “informal entry fees particularly in programmes of higher value and longer duration, and ‘ghost workers’ or fraudulent muster rolls in some of the public work programmes”. In distributing projects under FFW programme, it is alleged that Chairmen often give priority to those UP members who maintain a close alliance with them. Allegations are also there that any UP member who supports the opposite political party is likely to be deprived in getting project tasks under the FFW programme. The same situation prevails in the distribution of cards under

the VGD and VGF programmes. The rationale for adopting such a tendency by the chairmen, according to them, is not only to consolidate the patron-client relation but also to increase their vote bank during elections. Participants of different FGDs also reported that the local MP influences the decisional process of VGF programmes. This is frequent news in the media of the country. However, NGO performance is also not beyond question. Giving an example, one participant of FGD session said: “in our village, NGO is responsible for distributing food grains. Sometimes they fail to distribute on time. Sometimes it is distributed even in a week. Our sufferings increased enormously. But no action is taken against them, from any quarter” (Female, Rowmari, 24 November, 2011).

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has summarised the fact that, as far as the Monga concerned, current GO and NGO activities are far from meeting these challenges in their proper perspective. The most successful aspect of delivering food and livelihood security under the different actors in this region is giving communities access to improved technologies for sustainable and diversified production – both crops and livestock – through direct training, advice, services and inputs to the target communities (Coupe and Pasteur, 2009), but decentralisation of the different actors actions and responsibilities in the development process has taken place without clear guidance, leading to the poor distribution of resources and without considering local knowledge, active participation and needs. Also the Monga in the greater Rangpur has suffered from a concrete policy since the problem was placed in national planning documents.

I would like to conclude that though there are many different programmes in operation, there are a number of areas that require consideration for investment within the existing national food policy and poverty reduction framework and the programmes to address the Monga. I am not here speaking of the kind of economic uplift that results in transparent gains in quality of life indicators for a broad mass of people; rather, it is the broad based capacity, especially among the Monga-affected poor, to marshal their staying power amid the recurrent crises of poverty and hunger by exploiting the undoubtedly elusive margin of economic reproduction. Here, I argue that the policy agendas need to reflect their agro-ecological, social and economic circumstances, and the guidelines for GO and NGOs working with local people must be embedded in local people’s actual needs, livelihood perspectives and opportunities. The development programmes may be supported by internal and external resources, but local people need to have control themselves of those resources as a people’s organisation is a fundamental ingredient of the process of empowering (Oakley *et al.*, 1991). I also argue that actors’ actions cannot simply be linked to an existing project concept as an add-on. A policy of

handing over power and resources or in other words ‘delegating’ power to the Monga-affected poor rather than actors establishing control over the day to day life of the poor. Mukherjee (1999) added a point that asserting their rights is the only way by which households can be empowered and developed through a self propelling mechanism. I believe that extending and improving Monga interventions are only likely to happen if all actors are proactively involved as my key argument is that livelihoods are socially constructed and reconstructed, through the interplay of actions carried out by actors, whether they are acting vis-à-vis each other on an individual or collective basis, and whether or not they draw upon formal or informal sets of relations (Huq, 2001). Finally I argue that there is a need to know the process of how the poverty is produced and reproduced and then a radical shift is necessary from using the “old” or “established” answer to address poverty through the “new” or “revisionist” answers.¹¹⁹ Together with this general conclusion, the next and final chapter will illustrate the possible recommendations at policy and programmes in promoting the food security to food sovereignty and eradicating the Monga in northwest Bangladesh by including further research needs in academic and development arenas.

¹¹⁹ Drawing on evidence from across the Rural South, Rigg (2006) concluded that livelihoods in the countryside have become de-linked from farming; poverty and inequality from land ownership; and poverty and inequality from occupation and activity which is to re-focus the question on rural spaces, rather than on rural populations. He also stated that “where agrarian reform does lead to a redistribution of land, it may not lead to a concomitant redistribution of wealth”. Thus opposing the “old” solutions to address the rural South poverty, he proposed “new” or “revisionist” answers. See, Rigg, (2006) for detail.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion: Reflections, Rethinking and Implications

9.1 Introduction

This research sets out to understand risk and resilience from the perspective of very vulnerable households in northwest Bangladesh whose basic livelihoods are in jeopardy and who are exposed to chronic food insecurity and the Monga. I have adopted a constructivist approach to draw out the underlying multiple physical and socio-economic-political factors that have shaped food vulnerability at the household level and to demonstrate how the Monga is viewed nowadays. In particular, I have explored the households' everyday hunger experiences to create a new vocabulary around the old problem of the Monga in their locality. The thesis also offers more features on household risk minimisation and simultaneously, the effectiveness of accumulating assets to make a buffer against future risks in the livelihood context. In the following section 9.2, I return to the research questions outlined in Chapter one to reflect on the key findings of this research and then move to section 9.3 where I discuss the contribution this thesis makes to the academic literature. From a synthesis of adopted theories and empirical evidence, I present my perspective of food security and the Monga in northwest Bangladesh from three points of view: conceptual implications, methodological implications and policy implications. In section 9.4, I then propose several ideas for future research including the limitations of this thesis and, finally in section 9.5 I make my concluding remarks.

9.2 Summary of research findings

This section summarises the research findings according to the research questions presented in Chapter One. Although I addressed and discussed the research questions throughout the thesis, I will now return to them in concert and relate them to my empirical and theoretical findings.

How does 'space vulnerability' (re)shape 'food vulnerability' at household level in Greater Rangpur?

The descriptions of livelihoods in chapter four have provided deep insights into how vulnerabilities are connected with the wider regional and national contexts that have shaped both transitory and chronic food insecurity at household level in greater Rangpur. In particular, it showed the most striking features of how marginalisation and immiseration are the norm of the poor households in this region. We found that households are constantly struggling to improve their situation and to find ways to sustain their livelihood. But vulnerabilities are the

outcome of an interaction of different internal and external factors and the processes that are experienced differently by the poorest households in spatial context within this region. These underlying factors can be grouped into three main types: agro-ecological constraints and exposure to natural disasters, socio-economic and cultural constraints, and political neglect of addressing the Monga.

Household vulnerabilities closely intertwined with adverse environmental phenomena and disasters reflect the 'human ecology of endangerment' (Hewitt, 1997). Physical constraints, particularly sandy to sandy loam acidic soil conditions, climatic variability like less rainfall and high temperatures, increasing disasters such as floods, droughts, and river bank erosion, acted as proximate causes of regular occurrences of seasonality of income and consumption vulnerabilities, multiplied by concomitant social pragmatics, have had a cumulative bearing upon the socio-economic conditions and livelihood support systems of the poor. Household consumption is sensitive to shocks, meaning that the poor are less stretched in certain periods of favourable circumstances, but inclement weather and other shocks may well move them back below the poverty line.

However, the environmental reasons often highlighted to explain the Monga tend to hide from view deeper causal factors linked to social and economic inequality – i.e. structural factors. The findings therefore draw attention to how the declining command over food, powerlessness and social relations to production have interplayed as causal variables and then structural poverty has emerged, visible from the socio-economic and the political perspectives of this region. A highly skewed land ownership distribution, landlessness, tenancy burden, and institutional credit constraints for loans, together depress both production-based and trade-based entitlements. On the other hand, limited opportunities in the labour market, due to a lack of industrialisation and non-farm employment, force the poor into binding contracts involving labour power obligation and patron-client relationships, through which poverty is reproduced and perpetuated. Besides, a backdrop of agricultural liberalization, a lack of crop diversification due to limited agri-inputs (particularly the absence of dependable power supplies, the lack of irrigation facilities, and absence of proper credit from formal sources) are other reasons why marginal and poor farmers remain in economic and food poverty. The farmers are 'guilty' of increasing cash-crop activities, further reducing the production of food crops, overworking the land with subsistence farming, and having many children to maximise the family's labour output. Though it is clearly understandable that to get ahead, households need some stable off-farm income, this is proving to be a challenge for most. Moreover, sustaining local livelihoods are yet a near-impossible task, since households have been increasingly marginalised in terms of their access to institutional or structural infrastructures in

the form of markets, health care facilities, extension services, formal credit; this adds to their hardship and affects their agency to respond to stresses. The most vulnerable are the women, particularly the women in female-headed households, children and old people and the people living in the *char* villages. Though recent improvement in social services to women (i.e. involvement in NGOs programmes, cultivation in the field) have provided them some flexibility, other factors such as low literacy, high rates of early marriage and dowry, religious customs like *pardha*, lack of power within the household, and very small monthly allowances for widows, have made them a 'powerless segment'¹²⁰ of society and vulnerability is deeply rooted in their lives.

Another problem is the market relation during the Monga. Though the empirics suggested that during the Monga period, prices of food items, mainly perishable food, decreases to some extent, there are large seasonal swings in prices of rice and other essential goods received by the households. In fact, there has not been much government intervention during the Monga, except open market sale mainly in upazila sadar (that is one explanation for the apparent lack of seasonal consumption swings in most urban areas), to correct any market imbalances. This causes of a budgetary crisis of the households and may in turn lead to an eventual inability to meet smooth consumption. Households' vulnerability to the Monga is thus, attributable to a failure to take advantage of benefits accruing from market relations that households mostly engage in practices. Indeed the region could be said to lack political clout for historical reasons (i.e. political agenda to pay back Ershad's region, lack of political will in the face of other priorities, structure of governance etc.) and therefore to have underemphasised in regional development policies and planning, along with the claim by some that growth has not been pro-poor. The vulnerability to food security of the poor people is, in fact and essentially, not an economic problem but a political one. The internal and external social relations which produce the marginality thus, erode households seasonal hunger resistance.

Along with the common forms of vulnerabilities, the empirical findings of this thesis also highlight how households are marginalised in relation to spatial context. As stated earlier (see, chapter three), attached *chars* are now the extended territory of the mainland and their people are now getting the benefits to some extent that the mainland people can get. But given the *char* land villages lie at this region's periphery, their vulnerability to the Monga, compared to the mainland and attached *char* villages, is severe, largely a function of both proximate and

¹²⁰ Green and Hulme (2005: 870) illustrate the importance of access with reference to a notional widow-headed household in South Asia, where the absence of a male spouse has a marginalising effect. She lacks resources and is therefore poor but the "social casting of widows as second-class citizens, and the associated processes of asset stripping, is politically institutionalised within customary, statutory, and common law systems that licence and perpetuate such processes of impoverishment".

structural forces. The *char* dwellers are the most vulnerable in all perspectives and continue to eke out a living on the margin. Their marginalisation is straightforward. From their own observation, we have seen that households reproduce themselves, to a greater degree, in differentiated ways. Households are in no sense homogeneously situated like the mainland and attached *char* areas, in relation to the production process and the circuits of exchange due to geographical isolation (i.e. remoteness from the mainland), socio-economically backwardness, and complex pattern of accumulation, impoverishment and differentiation. Productive units vary markedly in terms of their size, off-farm income earning capability, landholding, indebtedness and their capacity to accumulate, save and invest. Social and hidden power relations within the *char* villages (i.e. dominance of the *mattabar* or *jodder*) are notable. It is evident that inequalities – in the case of both political rights and powers – are playing an important role in the development of persistent, endemic and the seasonal severe hunger and other crises in the *char* land. The agencies of *char* dwellers cannot, in any serious way, include the urgency and subject them to unequal treatment. Environmental problems (i.e. disasters) can be used for political ends, and hence, their extent and severity are accordingly magnified. The protective role of GO/NGOs is strongly missed when it is most needed. They are, indeed, the worst off with no creditworthiness. Yet, changes within the rural economy associated with the development and state intervention have not necessarily reduced the risks of their vulnerability and freed them from marginalisation. In fact, the number of negative forces operating on economy and food security situation in the *char* villages exceeds the positive forces by a wide margin. That is why, if the Monga is seen as routine shock of livelihood in this region, then the *char* households are at the riskiest end of the marginalisation process.

What is the Monga and how has it evolved? How is the Monga associated with households' everyday issues?

The empirical findings (see, chapter five) suggested that the 'Monga' is not a new phenomenon in this region, nor is it a near famine situation or merely food insecurity as the existing published literatures suggest. According to the households' perceptions the word 'Monga' is generally used to mean two sorts of extreme crisis: first, a 'specific need' (*Abhab*) of something that the poor cannot afford to buy (mainly a matter of access) and, second, a situation of 'unavailability of food and goods', particularly at a time of famine (*Akal*). There was no particular season or time-bound period of these crises; rather, it was a matter of their everyday concerns. The Monga imaginary in the past was a 'seasonal situation' in this region because during the two pre-harvest times, especially from the months of mid-September (beginning of Bangla month *Ashwin*) through mid-November (end of *Kartik*) and during mid-March (beginning of the *Chaitra*) to end of April (first half of *Baishak*), poor agricultural wage labourers don't have any employment in the agricultural sector and the marginal and small

farmers face a cash flow crisis. As there are no alternative jobs and different coping measures are necessary to survive, so their *Abhab* becomes severe and households' normal food consumption decreases significantly, leading to starvation. In the household context, a situation of both *Abhab* and *Akal* - a widespread and extreme form of 'scarcity' leading to hunger and a dearth in their livelihoods occurred, which they called *Kartikmashi Abhab* or *Akal* and *Chaitramashi Abhab* or *Akal*. Recently people have not been dying due to lack of food in the way that the *Akal* was experienced in 1974. Thus, crises of scarcity have become known as *Kartikmashi Abhab* or *Chaitramashi Abhab*. But merging this experience with the resonance of earlier famines, the term 'Monga' has been politicised as meaning of a 'seasonal famine like situation' and through the efforts of the media, political parties and the development partners like NGOs, it ignited public interest in political debates since 1990. Gradually, people of this northwest region have acquired a new identity as "*Monga-akkranto*" (Monga-affected) and this has made them a new 'target group' in development interventions and discourses without consideration of its district's distinct characteristics and the 'everyday livelihood discourse' of the people themselves. Poor people in this region also accepted this 'new meaning' of the Monga as they were getting a 'special brand of support' from NGOs and other voluntary organisations.

However, linking household perceptions with the theoretical approaches of this thesis, we have defined the Monga as a cyclical pattern of seasonal poverty that prevails in certain groups of poor people in the northwest region, resulting in entitlement failure and leading to a widespread food insecurity and hunger situation to a point where the affected households can no longer maintain a sustainable livelihood (Walker, 1989). Thus, the Monga situation is an outcome of vulnerability, inter-linked with four causal factors: external factors (e.g. natural disasters), internal factors (e.g. demographic and household characteristics), current state of the households (e.g. status of the households/livelihoods to which they belong), and opportunities people have (e.g. opportunities for alternative sources of livelihood). However, the findings suggest that changes of cropping pattern from single to two or three crops per year (i.e. particularly introduction of cash crops, irrigated Boro, and spreading of the seasonal load of work and food supply, etc.), the *Chaitra-Baishak* Monga season is now less severe or lengthy (see, figure 5.3). But although agriculture may have reduced the length of the Monga season, it has not alleviated the chronic food insecurity (*Abhab*).

Among everyday concerns, hunger is the main crisis at household level. But households were found to have different views (see, Table 5.1) of the Monga situation depending on its relative impact on them, their own household status, and on their coping strategies. The recurrent seasonal phenomenon of the Monga is found to be both an aggregate shock and, to some

extent, an extension of year-round poverty and food deprivation conjured through an array of socio-political and ecological jeopardy. In fact, the physical vulnerability is linked to economic vulnerability and this, in turn, is linked to social vulnerability. The households that undergo starvation during the Monga are also likely to experience food deprivation, though in a milder form, in non-Monga seasons and expect to suffer hardship in the next Monga season as well. The 'Monga' contributes to a vicious cycle of increasing indebtedness and poverty because, even though the shortage of labouring opportunities and the high price of food will end, many people will be worse off for a long time to come due to debt pressure. As female-headed households and other households in isolated *chars* are the most vulnerable, even in normal seasons, their suffering is inevitably increased during the Monga. The findings also suggested that seasonal food insecurity and hunger experienced by the households over many years have resulted in the long term marginalisation and impoverishment of the affected people.

What are the households' everyday food production and consumption behaviour and practices? What are the core characteristics of their food insecurity and hunger situation during the Monga?

We saw in chapter six that the nature of the relationship between the day to day running of the households' activities and their food security depends on various interrelated factors: their asset and resource base for maintaining their economic viability; the characteristics of the household concerned (e.g. size, composition, and headship); the diversity of activities directed at the gendered division of labour; and the perceptions that the households have on food security. Both culturally and in practice, men are responsible in productive activities and decision making powers and women in the reproductive sphere (i.e. food and fuel collection, childcare, and other domestic chores) and occupy an inferior position in the household, with some exceptions in involvement with productive activities, i.e. livestock rearing, weeding, and pumpkin cultivation. Younger children also take part in helping with domestic works and earning cash or kind both in the normal situation and during the Monga. Women in female-headed households have to play both productive and reproductive roles. Men contribute less time (i.e. one to two hours per day) on food-related activities than women (i.e. three to four hours per day). However, households' food provisioning strategies become weaker during the Monga.

In everyday food provisioning strategies, households are not so much concerned with maximising food supplies; rather, they try to secure at least two meals a day. Though most have some nutritional knowledge, with the exception of the comparatively better off households like small farmers, the preference is for a belly full of food twice a day, mainly rice, with preferably at least one kind of vegetable; and for the very poor it is just to have a full

stomach, whatever the food may be. Such perceptions are closely tied with the capacity of what they are able to purchase. Rather than their own production, most of the households' main food acquisitions depend on different sources: from the market, acquiring from the CPRS, taking a loan, or in kind from friends and family. Small and marginal farmers also mostly depend on the market, as their main staple food stocks end as immediate after the harvest. Household access to food is still largely based on the availability of locally grown produce, which is extremely tenuous and highly seasonal. The findings also suggest that resource endowment has no direct relationship with the ability to obtain adequate food, and hence, the outcome at the exchange entitlement¹²¹ mapping depends on much more than a household's ownership bundle. Instead, whether or not a given ownership bundle translates into adequate food depends on how the households perceive and thereafter problematise their situation and also on uncontrollable outcomes. Therefore, the food security clustering that we have observed represents a lifeworld that depends on how those concerned interpret and predict the reality around them, the experiences they bring to bear, and the norms that bind them to the choices they make.

The household observations and 24 hour recall information showed that households routinely lessened their portion size in order to feed all of the members and to avoid running out of food for the next meal. Nevertheless, they suffer from a high level of food insecurity in the context of the number of meals they can take; most of them take one or two meals (on average) a day, and certainly only one full meal a day. Their food baskets contain more or less the common food items all year round except in the crisis period of the Monga and on festive days. The incidence of their consumption is very similar across households and relies on a basic subsistence diet (i.e. rice, vegetables, dal, etc.). Protein, either animal or fish is rarely consumed and depends on good times of economic affordability. Though males and children get priority in food allocation, unlike the former situation in the countryside, gender discrimination is now less prominent in the studied villages. Giving more nutritious foods to pregnant women, children and aged people has increased recently, but factors like overall poverty and dietary quality still constrain their nutrition status.

During the Monga, the core characteristics of the household's food insecurity and hunger experiences revolve broadly around three dimensions: they frequently cut back quality food, (i.e. less dietary diversity); quantity (i.e. number of meals and food); and they experience

¹²¹ It is significant that one of Sen's earliest (1976) published papers on the entitlement approach is titled "Famines as failures of exchange entitlements" (Devereux, 2001:259). The exchange entitlement mapping is the function that specifies the set of alternative "commodity" bundles that the person can command respectively for each endowment bundle (Sen 1981). Sen provides a basis that hunger can be caused by "exchange entitlement decline" (adverse shifts in the exchange value of endowments for food, e.g. falling wages or livestock prices, rising food prices).

psychological suffering. All of these manifestations occurred within the context of their overall food provisioning, merely to postpone hunger and to survive. However, the performance of each of the strategies employed to meet food needs varies with household (e.g. some households followed socially unacceptable means of food acquisition like stealing food and vegetables as empirically evidenced), resource endowment, and how these food supplies are subsequently managed. But the hardships in food provisioning often go beyond their control, reflecting their “powerlessness” during the Monga. The quality dimension reflected much dependency on inedible coping foods, like replacing rice with root crops which is seen as a “*garib manusher khaddo* (poor man’s food). Households frequently switched to coping foods (i.e. *Bhater marh*, *Khud*, *Bhusi*, *Jongli latapata*, *Gacher mul*, *etc.*, for details see table 6.5). The monotony of meals is a major concern for everyone, reflected in the lack of intra-meal and inter-meal variety. Curtailing the number of meals, skipping meals, eating twice by dividing a meal in half, insufficient quantity of food, adult hunger, going to bed without any food and feeling hungry were found to be common characteristics in all households. The empirical findings demonstrated that the absence of nutritious and healthy foods day after day during the Monga affected the household members psychologically, such as feelings of deprivation, anxiety, distress, embarrassment and shame, uncertainty about the next meal, as well as fear of food deprivation in the upcoming season. This psychological suffering also has a corollary at the “social” level. The intake of unconventional foods and consumption disparities has health consequences in the form of both undernourishment and different related diseases such as Kwashiorkor, diarrhoea, cholera, stomach upset, and gastric problems and the effects are particularly high for women, pregnant women, children and aged people.

What coping strategies do the households pursue during the Monga and how effective are these strategies in reducing seasonal hunger and, in turn, their long-term livelihood outcomes?

Household risk management, risk absorption and risk-taking related to the Monga involves both coping and adaptation strategies, however the ability to cope depends on the level of capabilities, assets and activities, in other words a logical extension of everyday livelihood strategies as well as the social and political linkages they involve. The role of normative social values and preferences are also influential. The focus of household coping strategies primarily has two dimensions: budgeting in the household economy and, the range of food entitlements; both are aimed at balancing income and expenditure, food access and food consumption through a range of strategies in different ways such as production and accumulation, and through non-market transfers that may be asset-based or labour-based. There is also consumption adjustment and government- and NGO-assisted support through social safety-nets (see, Table 7.4). However, the findings also suggest that the scope for intensifying the use

of these coping strategies is itself limited, as a significant proportion of them were households' normal behaviour even in the normal times (i.e. collecting food from CPRs, widowed allowance). Rather, they are replaced by a process of adaptation, as in structurally vulnerable livelihood systems the notion of optimising the trade-off between reducing sensitivity and increasing resilience. Moreover, there is often a breakdown of the moral economy when crises affect a wide section of the community, and lack of access to formal institutions forces households to take extreme coping strategies more frequently. Nowadays migration to urban centres is a very prominent strategy for males. However, all strategies are characterised as a continuum, rather than as discrete categories (Devereux, 1999).

In the context of coping with the Monga, it seems in the context of long term livelihood concerns that not all of the adopted strategies are beneficial (see, Table 7.5). Simply according to the entitlement from which they are derived, or on the basis of prioritization like best option or the greatest effectiveness, these reflect both risks and expected returns. Some strategies (i.e. cash loan from a *mahajan* at high interest) may give a household instant means of coping with a situation (i.e. cash for buying food and other basics) but at the risk of the erosion of future income and the risk of incurring further debt. In the context of long term livelihoods it has a low return. Many households cannot avoid experiencing food deprivation of varying intensity and they are forced to implement resource erosive coping strategies, some of which may be virtually irreversible (Blaikie, 1985) and destroy their own and their descendants' future livelihoods (Cannon, 1991: 306). Both the theoretical discussion and empirical descriptions suggested two reasons in this regard: first, households are often forced into highly inequitable short-run solutions that deepen their poverty (Chambers, Longhurst, and Pacey, 1981); and secondly, there are emergent economic and market constraints (Moris, 1989). Thus, the local coping mechanisms are connected to the wider political and economic system (Watts, 1983; Cannon, 1991). The uncertainty regarding future seasonal distress also makes poor households opt for inefficient livelihood strategies, thus perpetuating the cycle of endemic poverty and its seasonality. Therefore, the Monga can be properly understood in the context of the coping behaviour of the affected households.

How have public policies and programmes been shaped and to what extent do they work to eradicate the Monga?

There is no specific Monga policy in Bangladesh. Policy to combat the Monga has been shaped by the country's overall poverty reduction strategy since 2005, which recognised the Monga as a matter of 'lean seasons'. Policy statements on national food security, particularly the National Food Policy (2006) and its recent Plan of Action (2008 – 2015) have given less importance to the Monga and the risks of acute food crisis, although a target has been set for

increasing the effectiveness of targeted food security programmes and other safety nets. In the National Agriculture Policy (1996), the Monga is considered as seasonal poverty due to agro-ecological constraints in a one crop a year region and targeted to combat hunger through a framework of agricultural development. Different actors like government agencies, NGOs and multi- and bilateral institutions are working in mitigating Monga but their involvement varies according to internal factors (i.e. links with the concerned government departments) and external factors (i.e. donor priorities and the contested roles of state and civil society). The different local government levels (i.e. district, upazila and Union Parishad) mostly follow the state policy and plans.

Currently, there are four programmes available directly to combat Monga in varying degrees: agricultural diversification programmes (i.e. cultivation of short duration rice (SDR) varieties, pumpkin production in dried river beds, livestock rearing); a targeted food, cash and assets transfer programme named PRIME (Programmed Initiative for Monga Eradication), the community *Dhan* Bank, and the nationwide common social safety net programmes. However, micro-credit, and two special programmes like the CLP and GFSUPW have been implemented partly seeking to reduce the impacts of the Monga. My findings suggest that current programmes are unlikely to have much impact on the extent of the fluctuations in consumption, even together. The separate effects of some programmes have been found promising (i.e. cultivation of SDR, *Dhan* Bank), however their operations are limited and sustainability uncertain, and expansion in future will require further policy initiatives and effective coordination among the different actors. Moreover, it is frequently alleged that generalised programmes (i.e. social safety nets, micro-credit, etc.) do not build on poor people's own efforts, probably the best way of ensuring the full participation of the people concerned and responding to their actual needs and changing the market situation. In fact, it has been suggested that such short term interventions prevent the materialisation of growth potential (Webb and Braun, 1994) and undermine the chance of income diversification among the rural poor, whereas both social safety nets and micro-credit remain the key to survival and long term asset building in the Monga-prone areas. Moreover, the so-called 'dependency syndrome'¹²² destroys the self motivation of the poor and creates high expectations concerning the material values of beneficiaries towards NGOs. To make matters worse, regions like Monga-prone greater Rangpur often fail to attract the investments that are essential to raise the

¹²² In the chapter five, we saw that during the Monga people become dependent on relief. It is frequently argued that started of huge number of NGOs activities in the Rangpur Region in the last decade has created a dependency atmosphere onto their offered economic and social assistance programmes (see, Ali, 2006b; Akram, 2008). Elsewhere, literature suggests that large scale social assistance breeds 'dependency' among beneficiaries and undermining their self-sufficiency (Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2011). There is also an associated assumption that poor who are given cash supports like the cash transfers, often they inevitably spend it in other unproductive ways as opposed to using it constructively. Similar evidences (i.e. taking loan for IGA is used in repay of previous loan or consumption of food, etc.) we also saw in the chapter four (see, section 4.3.5).

local economy's resilience and thus break the poverty seasonality cycle. All the talk nationally, among local and donor agencies of 'making markets work for the poor' at the base 'base of the pyramid' does not yet seem to have been translated into action here (Scott, 2012:281). Thus this thesis argues that the Monga requires a tailored policy response because generalised approaches do not work.

9.3 Contribution of the thesis

9.3.1 Conceptual implications

In this thesis, I have contributed to the conceptualisation of two on-going vital issues: vulnerability to household food security, and the Monga – in particular the context of northwest Bangladesh. We have seen that the Monga is a part of 'normal' cycles of reproduction in poor communities, though the precise form and extent of each is an empirical question. In chapter two, using the current food security conceptual standpoint I argued that household food insecurity and the seasonal hunger during the Monga is not a matter of food availability in the market; rather, it is a function of the characteristics of households not having enough to eat. Expanding the critical links of households food security to power and wider political processes, I argued through the political economy lens of Watts and Bohle's (1993) 'causal structure of hunger' that vulnerability to the Monga are constituted by three causal powers: lack of entitlements, lack of capacity/powerlessness, and exploitative/unequal practices. The empirical findings throughout the thesis also linked our attention to the theory that I have discussed in the chapter two. By concentrating on social relations from the perspective of the household economy and the nexus of relations in which it is enmeshed, the connections can be understood between the material circumstances and ecological conditions as they exist in the northwest region (Watts, 1987). The empirical findings clearly show that the Monga is situated on the larger canvas of households' failed entitlements, especially the own-labour based entitlement (i.e. Sen's entitlement approach) and the poverty problem of a particular class (i.e. Watts and Bohle's '*space of hunger*' approach). They are affected as a cause and a consequence of socio-economic, political and ecological marginalization leading to seasonal hunger/famishment situation in-between dearth and a full blown famine (i.e. Ranganami's famine approach). For the vulnerable, chronically poor households – those already experiencing hunger – the Monga is an extreme manifestation of interlocking long term impacts. In fact, it involves multiple factors. The social relations of households inequality lies on land-labour intensification and the risks of ecological deterioration among the poor households. The differentiation also points to the location of ecological problems: location in class sense – poorer households seems especially vulnerable – yet also geographically, since marginalised poor often find themselves marginalised in space (i.e. *char* land), making

tradeoffs, minimising limitations, choosing between odds, tackling the challenge of crises (i.e. floods, price hike, etc.), the diminution of future asset accumulations, and having the resilience to persist, etc. This understanding of the material conditions leading to a simple reproduction squeeze can perhaps account for the increasing demise or irrelevance of adaptive and coping strategies (Watts, 1987). Differential command over food can be grasped politically (i.e. mass corruption), as different formations of rights and powers rooted in the political economic soil of disparity and dependency. The limited capacity of the state's to protect the households' entitlements and also see the solution to the Monga as a short term relief based and social safety net oriented programmes confined the households to the Monga crisis. Imbedded in these factors are therefore, fundamental issues of values and power in society. This suggests that the salience of powerlessness and the social relations of production are not merely agricultural and food availability issues. Rather, as such approaches mostly overlook the structural components and social system and, also not to place people's general livelihoods at the centre of their policies and programmes, thus perceived to have failed in combating the Monga. I argue that there can be no denying that the social impact of Monga is ubiquitous and fundamental and the Monga should be conceived as specific character as constituted in specific social system. Thus, the challenge of ensuring food security of this region need to both eliminate of persistent, endemic deprivation and seasonal Monga. However, the respective demands on institutions and policies of the two can be distinct and even dissimilar. Success in one field may not guarantee success in the other (Sen, 1999: 186).

Though the present study has investigated the Monga in rural Rangpur largely from the food security perspective, particularly, Watts and Bohle's proposed 'space of vulnerability', the broad notion of this theoretical position supported by empirical findings clearly has emphasised the Monga through households risk, resilience or capacity rather than mere analysis of quantitatively defined indicators based food insecurity and hunger. It has provided an explanation of the causal relations of the Monga and its interrelated vulnerability associated with contemporary poverty situation, changing social and political relations within the northwest society, and the rest of the country as well. Thus, this thesis contributes a rethinking of the conceptualisation of the Monga, vulnerability and household resilience through multidisciplinary approaches to work out what the 'solution' might be. Though reasonably old, combining three important approaches: the entitlement, political economy and political ecology, the 'space of vulnerability' thus may be a promising approach seeking to understand and analyse the vulnerability to livelihoods security of the poor through the lens of the poor themselves.

9.3.2 Methodological implications

The research has adopted the increasingly conceptually-driven qualitative style of fieldwork that has become popular in human geography in recent years (Islam, 2006). Earlier, Messer (1989) argued that seasonality of hunger and food insecurity through ethnographic examination has long since been a concern of anthropologists. In the context of Bangladesh, such an approach is mostly absent in food security research. Deploying different methods like households observations, semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, FGD, and attending roundtable discussions, I have watched people on their own ground and interacted with them in their own language and on their own terms, on the basis that the life or behaviour of food insecure households under study ‘becomes meaningful, reasonable’ (Goffman, 1961). Semi-structured interviews with the households and FGDs with villagers have been used as the main source of information. The discussion has incorporated essential elements of the perceptions of the Monga and hunger by the people who have directly experienced these conditions, while the household observations have been used for complementary discussion of the household livelihoods and this has enabled me to provide a representative snapshot and systematically to explore the everyday food security situation. Interviews with officials from GOs and NGOs and other key informants like Chairman of Community *Dhan* bank gave a wide picture of the interaction between socio-economic-political and institutional factors that exist in northwest Bangladesh. In line with Kennedy (2003), I would say here that “qualitative methods are more suitable and direct measures of food insecurity than other proxy measures”. From a methodological perspective, the contribution of the thesis is that it has offered a novel way of knowing the subjective reality of the hunger situation during the Monga from the so-called ‘ordinary’ people that is mostly poverty-driven and not limited to earlier styles of clinical definitions. Therefore, the present research is essentially an ethnographic quest of food (in)security in a geographical framework, offering both concepts and methods for anticipating where seasonal food insecurity occurs now and may arise in the future. My experience of undertaking this research thus convinces me that more such micro-level work needs to be done. I am now certain that the bottom up, particularly, detailed fieldwork provides insights that will be vital for understanding and managing the development process in the future. The geographical and other social researches in Bangladesh regarding the Monga and food security can benefit from the experience of this research, especially in the replication of some aspects of most innovative qualitative methods, and certainly the most informative experiences and aspects of the fieldwork in rural settings in northwest Bangladesh and also the empirical findings.

However, it is important to mention here that my interest in using qualitative methods does not seek to replace or substitute widely accepted quantitative measures such as anthropometric survey data, household expenditure surveys, dietary intake assessments, or the FAO methodology.

9.3.3 Policy implications

My research has contributed to the advancement of knowledge on food insecurity situation of northwest region in general, and households' Monga vulnerability in particular. The study sheds light on the entitlements of the affected poor, which hindered access, use and control over resources under a complex social and power relationship by which they become marginalised. As in the northwest region, where eradicating food insecurity and Monga through the different actors by themselves are progressing in very slow pace like what elsewhere long ago Warwick (1979) called 'object with no velocity', thus the empirical results and discussions support several generalisations that have important policy implications. I argue that the promise of successful intervention lies on not so much ambitious policy and programmes; rather, it exists in making them work in live situations, linking the desirable with the feasible, and the economically rational with the politically practicable (Field, 1993). Elsewhere, Longhurst (1986) argues that seasonal phenomena and the interrelationships among them are too important to ignore and that seasonal hunger needs to be approached by helping people cope with seasonal stress – by spreading the risk, reducing it or strengthening the buffers that exist to counter its worst effects. This approach could lead to 'season – proof' development policy and avoid the danger of relegating seasonality to an interesting but intractable phenomenon. On similar lines, Crawshaw (1991) suggested that raising people above the seasonal threshold can remove a constraint and encourage self-sustaining growth. Here, I would suggest recognising and incorporating the connotation of the Monga syndrome in its proper perspectives with a new specific policy framework as well as incorporating it in the current national policy guidelines. As the Monga and its roots of predicament range from improper macroeconomic policies to the political structures of local societies, therefore, it also essentially needs both structural as well as operational treatments at different levels, such as local, regional and national level measures. According to Khandker and Mahmud (2012) a possible recommendation in this regard requires a threefold approach: "(a) combining seasonally oriented policies with those that are aimed at removing the underlying structural causes of endemic poverty, (b) reducing income seasonality through agricultural and rural diversification and enhancing the ability of poor households to insure against seasonality, and (c) helping the poor households cope with seasonal hunger so they can avoid using extreme coping measures under distress."

As the critical problem with the Monga-prone areas is widespread joblessness for certain periods of time and the existing job market is characterised by poverty-level wages, the best way to reduce hunger to a greater degree is to give people the means to earn higher and more stable incomes and to create assets (World Bank, 1986). This implies a specific regional development plan for the Monga areas to promote the development of non-agricultural businesses, encouraging sufficient diversifications of the rural non-farm economy, creating jobs and putting upward pressure on rural wages. I would say that three basic livelihood aspects should be considered in this regard: livelihood provisioning (i.e. to meet food and to maintain minimum nutritional levels including other essential needs), livelihood protections (i.e. the prevention of the erosion of households' productive assets), and livelihood promotions (i.e. increasing households' resilience for meeting food and other basic needs on a sustainable basis). Along with creating employment, various recent initiatives in the agricultural sector (e.g. cultivation of SDR varieties), targeted interventions (e.g. PRIME), community initiatives (e.g. *Dhan Bank*, cash savings through *Samittee*) that are conceptually sound and technically appropriate have resulted in positive outcomes for the reduction of the impact of the Monga and they should be further strengthened.

Some gaps remain, such as lack of coordination, absence of appropriate databases, weakness in implementation, and poor programme impact monitoring, and there is a need for coordination among different agencies and their programmes so as to ensure a good partnership effort and to prevent duplication on the one hand and, on the other hand, promote a proper balance between short-run measures that prevent immediate hardship and programmes that have long-run effects in promoting livelihoods. For an effective outcome, the official poverty statistics need to incorporate the seasonal dimensions of poverty and food deprivation (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012) and an effective database of the affected households and their socio-economic conditions should be prepared for improving the targeted interventions. As programmes have often failed in practice because of the weaknesses (i.e. corruption, bribes in VGD card distribution, and leakages in beneficiary targets) in proper implementations, therefore, accountability must be ensured strictly. Another missing link is a proper monitoring system of the changing situation. The achievements and sustainability of applied intervention results needs to be monitored and subsequent actions should be taken.

Some other related issues and their priority to policy inclusion has risen under the Monga mitigation. No clear policy has emerged for reducing in migration flows, for instance by providing information on risks and the costs involved. Provision for social and economic protection needs special attention, including investment in basic education, skill development, and health and nutrition interventions. As the region is already characterized by frequent

natural disasters, the threat of climate change is an unwelcome additional burden that may affect all spheres of food security and has the potential to increase Monga vulnerability. To consolidate the gains, any Monga mitigation strategy needs to incorporate proper policy to address future environmental challenges and to plan for adaptation to climate change. The experiences of NGOs in the studied areas also suggest that certain criteria are necessary for successful group mobilization and empowerment efforts, regardless of political considerations. These include a willingness to experiment and find the right methods of working with vulnerable groups; a capacity to adapt; an ability to sustain programme support for a long duration; and the specific targeting of participants. These above issues may lead to some key actions for fostering pro-poor innovation through both social and economic entrepreneurship in the Monga-prone areas, but for this a shift in policy orientation on the part of the larger NGOs and the government link-administrations, including relevant financial institutions operating in northwest region, would be required. Finally, a gradual shift is needed from food security to food sovereignty.

9.4 Limitation and future research directions

The Monga in greater Rangpur includes a number of interrelated socio-economic, agro-ecological and political issues. It, in fact, indicates some issues that could potentially be significant to further investigation of the Monga vulnerability both in academic and development sectors in Bangladesh. Some of them are highlighted below:

First, this research does not investigate the Monga from the households' nutritional security point of view. But the empirical evidence has suggested that a number of diseases are associated with the Monga, particularly those related to long term undernourishment. As overall food intakes have highly significant seasonal correlations (i.e. intakes being generally higher during the postharvest period), seasonal hunger and food anxieties may be pervasive, leading to gorging and abstaining behaviours. Hence, intensive research on eating habits, utility of supplementary coping food consumption and their nutrition value in times of dearth could be carried out. Besides, the interrelationships among the numerous seasonally variable factors, notably illness, income and nutrition, the calories in household members' intake, and the body mass index (BMI), and how rapidly perceptions and behaviours change under changing environmental conditions would also be useful. Concentrations of vulnerable households, like the *char* areas, should also be prioritised in future research.

This research doesn't attempt any significant insights of the agricultural development in the Monga-prone areas. But we saw that one of the important interventions to tackle the Monga is the introduction of SDR varieties. Statistics showed that by 2011, about one-fifth of all *Aman*

land in the Rangpur region had been switched to these rice varieties (Neogi and Samsuzzaman, 2011). Other development in agricultural sector is increasing interest in cash crop cultivation, such as tobacco, maize, potato and vegetable production through women's involvement. Therefore, in-depth studies of the achievement of different SDR varieties and cash crops in the context of their further expansion suggest possibilities (and constraints) in combating the Monga. In relation to this, we also need to gain a better understanding of the seasonal pattern of employment generation and wage formation under such newly adopted agricultural practices.

Similarly, the role of the community *Dhan* Bank that promotes new hopes to tackle the Monga has been discussed in this research. As the number of *Dhan* banks has been increasing since its first implementation in 2006, detailed understanding of its opportunity, challenges and scope from the household perspectives would be an interesting area of further research.

It is important to mention that one of the often neglected aspects in Monga research is the local social system. Likewise, though this research has limitedly highlighted some of the issues, we need much more information on social networks –those in normal times provide flexibility and options to meet food needs, and those to which households resort in the time of the Monga. The well established social and informal relation to local elite like the *mahajan* and the newer form of formal social relations with NGOs and mechanisms (i.e. micro-credit) and practices of exploitation also need more rigorous investigation in the underprivileged corners of the country.

This research can be questioned for not considering quantitative data. I solely used qualitative approaches and explored the Monga vulnerability through food insecurity perspectives. However, Monga could also to be seen in many more contexts and a mixed method approach in this regards could be carried out. As this study has tried to show, it is essential to work with an interdisciplinary approach as the Monga is interlinked with social science, agriculture, economics and politics. Thus, in-depth inter-vulnerability assessment covering several key issues of the different ecological and socio-cultural Monga-prone areas would be novel in exploring this spatial problem more comprehensively and analytically. For an example, a mapping of those regions that are frequently affected by or are vulnerable to seasonal poverty in Bangladesh has not been done so far. Studies like this are possible as general studies of poverty show. Thus, generating Monga vulnerability maps to depict the Monga-poverty linkage having updating facilities, for instance using GIS, may be effective for policy and programme formulation and implementation.

Finally, not only this research but also there has been no attempt so far to formulate indicators to systemically analyse the Monga situation including of inter-disciplinary approaches. To formulate these indicators is of major importance in developing and implementing strategies to address the Monga and seasonality in other regions of the country.

9.5 Concluding remarks

Finally, this thesis argues that though the Monga is context-specific (i.e. causes, timing and its potential consequences), its eradication will be complex because the social and livelihood mechanisms of the poor households are dysfunctional. Extreme poverty, defined as a composite of income poverty, human development poverty and social exclusion, has resulted in the Monga and chronic conditions of extreme food insecurity. Under the neoliberal journey of our state and society, the macroeconomic constraints have limited the political economy choices (De Janvry and Sburamanian, 1993) at the micro level and the hungry poor cannot yet be sure of any changes that may bring them a hunger-free life. My research findings have extended our boundaries beyond the thinking of earlier ‘agrarian questions’ of classical political economists to construct a new political economy of food insecurity and Monga, suggesting the inevitable requirement of a true political will and far-reaching changes in social relations of production, distribution and consumption accompanied with equitable and sustainable growth – since by its nature, positive outcomes cannot be expected overnight. In short, we need repoliticisation of food insecurity and the Monga (Atkins, 2009). Otherwise, as capitalism and its institutions only serve to promote a neo-liberal economy, there is a strong need for alternatives for the ordinary people (Mahmud, 2007). Important factors in this regard are to ensure food rights, make rural livelihoods more flexible and adaptable, and increase household resilience. Finally, the empirical findings of this thesis remind the reader of the promises that were made by the respective governments and the rich of the world to halve the number of the famished by 2015, as set forth in the Millennium Development Goals, and its practical progress so far with regard to the Monga vulnerability in the greater Rangpur in Bangladesh as a test case.

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Annex I Research Map

Research Questions	Main Issues covered	Suitable Methods	Data analysis procedure
<i>How does 'space of vulnerability' (re)shape 'food vulnerability' at household level in Greater Rangpur?</i>	Explore the background to the study villages and linkage between the physical, socio-economic, and political factors and household's marginalization, exploitation, and their chronic and transitory food insecurity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal discussion - Participant Observation (Household Observation) - In-depth interview with household heads - In-depth interview with Key informants - FGDs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrative Analysis - Ethnographic representation
<i>What is the Monga and how has it evolved? How is the Monga associated with households' everyday issues?</i>	Perception and knowledge on Monga, seasonality; historical changes and the extent of the Monga: past and present, the causes of the Monga; agriculture and transcending agricultural linkages; Monga and its relation to households' everyday livelihood issues and concerns during that season.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal discussion - In-depth interview with household heads - FGDs - In-depth interview with Key informants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrative Analysis - Grounded Theory Approach
<i>What are the households' everyday food production and consumption behaviours and practices? What are the core characteristics of their food insecurity and hunger situation during the Monga?</i>	Households' everyday food provisioning strategies and behaviours; production, access to food and market relations, ideas/understanding about goods, adequate food and food security, gendered division of labour and decision-making power, access to and control over resource and allocation, management; everyday food intake and consumption; household hunger and food insecurity characteristics: qualitative, quantities and psychological dimensions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participant observation (Household Observation) - In-depth interviews with household heads - FGDs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrative Analysis - Ethnographic Representation - Grounded Theory Approach
<i>What coping strategies do the households pursue during the Monga and how effective are these strategies in reducing seasonal hunger and, in turn, their long-term livelihood outcomes?</i>	How households stave off or overcome their vulnerability to the Monga: strategies and coping mechanisms; dynamics of and changes of everyday practices and behaviours, exchange activities, migration; key external relations of households: social support/capital, GO/NGOs institutional support; and household views, effectiveness of the adopted strategies in greater context of livelihoods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participant observation (Informal discussion) - Participant observation (Household Observation) - In-depth interviews with household heads - FGDs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrative Analysis - Ethnographic Representation - Grounded Theory Approach
<i>How have public policies and programmes been shaped and to what extent do they work to eradicate the Monga?</i>	Existing short term and long term programmes, policy, operation, relief, target, achievement and failure. Views about alternative options to promote livelihoods, appropriate and sustainable ways of addressing affected household needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-depth interviews with organisational personnel - In-depth interviews with household heads - FGDs - Secondary documents and reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrative Analysis - Grounded Theory Approach

Annex II

Guide for In-depth Interview (Household heads)

Livelihoods and Livelihood sources

Household characteristics like origin, education, marriage, children, land, assets, resources etc.

- What are the main sources of livelihood (employment, income, trade, production, etc)? What livelihood assets/opportunities do men and women have access to and control over? What constraints do they face?
- What do men and women do? Where (location/patterns of mobility)? When (daily and seasonal patterns)? What are men and women's productive roles (paid work, self-employment, and subsistence, production)? What are their reproductive roles (domestic work, child care, and care of the sick and elderly)? What decision-making do men/women participate in? - Household level; Community level

Food availability, access and utilization

Cooking and eating patterns

- Tell me about you and your family member's daily/festival and occasional food/eating practices/preference (24 hours recall for daily food consumption)

Ask about perceptions of "good" or "complete" food, in terms of dietary quality and healthiness as well as tradition. What counts more—quality or quantity, which can vary between times of food scarcity and availability? Their own perceptions about complete and satisfying food.

Food production/availability/ access

- What are your sources of food (or, what are all the ways you get food)? What you do to make sure you always have enough to eat? How are decisions about food made in your household? (In terms of purchase, food item, distribution, etc.)
- What are the things that worry you in everyday life? How does getting enough food compare to these? Are there moments when other things are more important than food?

Food/Crop Storage:

- How do you store your food (both in the field during the harvest and in the home)

Intra-household food allocation

- Who decides what types and quantities of food members of the household receives (e.g. during a meal)? Probes: Are there differences in the quantity that men and women and/or adults and children receive?
- Is there anything that would cause changes in the amounts given to each household member?

Risks to livelihood, food Security

- What are the main threats or challenges you face with regard to this source of livelihood and food security?

Probing questions: Are there things (Monga/disasters/climate change/other shocks) that make it difficult for you to do the livelihood activity? Are there things that decrease the productivity of the activity? Are there things that make it difficult for you to depend on the activity for your livelihood?" Are there any other threats or challenges that come to mind?

- How frequently do these occur (if applicable)? What causes do you think for such vulnerability?
 - Periodically (how often? When is the last time it happened?)
 - Chronically (basically all the time)
 - Seasonally (during which season?)

Monga

- Sufferer? Known? perception
- What are the causes of this risk/threat?
- When this occurs, which groups in the community does it affect the most? Why some people/groups are affected more than others (if applicable)? What proportion of the population are affected in your village: all, most, half, or few?
- What effect does the risk/threat have or what are the consequences of the risk/threat when it occurs? (their impacts on livelihoods: Agricultural Dimension: production; Market dimensions: food price and market, access and consumptions)

Food allocation

- How do you decide how much to eat on a daily basis?
- What are your sources of food (or, what are all the ways you get food)? What you do to make sure you always have enough to eat? How are decisions about food made in your household? (In terms of purchase, food item, distribution, etc.)
- What are the things that worry you in everyday food provision during the Monga? How does getting enough food compare to these? Are there moments when other things are more important than food?

Coping and adaptation

- What actions do you take in the face of this risk? Are there things you can do to minimize the negative impact it has on you? Employment change, seasonal migration or other? What type of problem (s) do you or household members face when you / he/ she migrates to work? Probe into reasons for doing certain things or not doing certain things where appropriate. What resources do you have for dealing with this threat? In times of crisis, what, who helped? (Family, friends, religious affiliation, mortgage, social programs or food aid?)
- What are some of the things you do to make sure you always have enough to eat? Reduce life style (reduce all expanses, change food intake in quality and quantity: smaller meals and/or skip whole meals)? Do you keep stores of food for the future?
- What type of assistance do you receive from the community, NGO, and government to help with this threat or challenge? If they do nothing, why? Why do they feel they cannot do anything about the threat?

Government projects/programmes in villages? Tell details; Are you involved with any NGO or anything? Which one? What do they do? What form of programme are you involved with? Any other co-operatives like rice co-operative/paddy bank exist?

- Has there been a change in the way people in your community respond to this threat? If so, how did you/others used to respond? Why has the change occurred? (*Ask older people in particular*)

Future concerns

- Are there things you can do to prevent it? What are the potential solutions to these problems? (to know their views/in terms of local setting/ What perspectives do they have on appropriate and sustainable ways of addressing their needs?)

Annex III

Checklist for Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) (Community representatives)

- Monga and seasonality: perception, hardship and changing nature
- Livelihood portfolio, livelihood diversification, involvement of women in income-earning activities, what makes livelihood secure? How?
- Resources: assets, savings, etc., knowledge, skills, experiences, management skills, experiences, information
- Market, access & control over assets; Gender, intra-household discrimination
- Production: cropping pattern, Production of livestock, fishing, gathering/collection of foods (wild/normal), storage, food exchange – change of practices over time
- Seasonality (normal, pre-harvest period and post harvest)
- Decision-making power on consumption, production, sale of produce, purchase of production inputs
- Food security/livelihood security/vulnerability: changing pattern of food consumption/security through different months (agricultural calendar), seasonality of food, opinion about composition of a good diet (how should it be composed), differences regarding children (boys and girls), adults (men and women), food taboos, impact of Monga/climate change/disasters on daily food practices, introduction of new foods etc.
- Monga: impacts on livelihoods: production; food price and market, access and consumptions
- Coping and adaptation: Support system: institutional supports GO/NGO, relief; Key external relations of households: social capital/network, remittance/mobility, Migration.
- GO/NGOs involvement, opinion about programmes, safety net / social protection etc.
- Concerns: own way of defining security/ vulnerability and opinion what they want/demand

Annex IV

Guide for In-depth Interview (Organisational personnel)

General

- Do you think northwest region of our country has a good and adequate food system?
- Do you think the food available in Northern region reflects the needs of the population?
- What do you think about Monga? Do you think food is adequate during Monga? (please define adequately)
- What about the price of food in this region in normal time compare to other parts? Are the prices of major foods changes during the Monga or other shocks?

Programmes

- What programmes is offering for food security/Monga?
- What Benefits/ facilities are offered? (loan/cash/credit/food/relief/etc.)
- Types: short term or long term (Monthly/yearly/seasonal or periodic (Monga/ or particular time of crisis e.g. natural disaster)?
- How long the programme has been running? How long it will be continued?
- Who is financing this programme? Government/donor agency/food aid?
- Was there any programme before this programme? What type? Which area? For whom (specify)?

Programme Target and Involvement

- Operation area; household/villages/union/Upazila are under this programme.
- How they selected? What criteria do follow? Who determines the criteria?
- Do you see any outside influence (from dynamics and decisions)? Are any local elite/political persons involved? Which influence? Any political influence?

Programme Strength and Weakness

- Programme achievement- risk reducing food security programme, risk mitigation, food commodity exchange programme (paddy exchange), and risk coping food programmes
- How the programmes are monitored/follow up? What is the effectiveness of the programme?
- Does the offered programme have any support to employment/income generation during Monga/or prolong natural disaster like flood/riverbank erosion? What kind of support / employment?
- What is the main weakness of the offered programme do you think? Any fund/aid misuse?
- Any conflict in running the programmes (Resource, Gender, Religious, Control, other External conflict)?

Recommendation/further action

- What do you see as the major barriers to promoting adequate and available food for poor?
- What could be done to improve poor people's physical access to healthy and adequate food in this region during Monga and natural shock?
- Does go/organization have any ideas/programme on how to address resource mobilization and enabling environments for poverty eradication, which have not yet been shaped into programs, or do you have any suggestions of alternative methods of addressing these issues?
- Does your organization have any programme/policies to address Climate change? Any networking with other organizations (International/national)?

Annex V

Examples of major actors involved in food security and Monga in northwest Bangladesh.

Major actors	Technical areas of activity		
	Livelihoods and income generation, social development	Health and nutrition	Disaster preparedness and response
Major International NGOs			
CARE Bangladesh	X	X	X
Save the Children (US and UK)	X	X	X
Helen Keller International (HKI)	X		
World Vision	X	X	X
Plan-Bangladesh	X		
Action Aid Bangladesh	X	X	
OXFAM Bangladesh	X	X	
CONCERN Bangladesh	X	X	X
Islamic Relief Bangladesh	X	X	
CARITAS Bangladesh	X	X	
UN Agencies			
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	X	X	
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)			
World Food Programme (WFP)	X	X	X
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)	X		
UNDP	X	X	X
Bi-lateral donors			
DFID	X	X	X
EC	X	X	X
USAID	X	X	X
Multi-lateral donors			
Asian Development Bank	X	X	X
World Bank	X	X	X
Major NGOs and micro-finance organisations			
BRAC	X	X	X
PKSF	X		
Grameen Bank	X		
GUK	X	X	X
RDRS	X	X	X
GK	X	X	X
AKOTA	X	X	X
USS	X		
TMSS	X	X	
SAP	X	X	

Sources: Haeften, Roberta and Moses, 2009 and fieldwork, 2011- 2012.

Annex VI

Major SSNPs in Bangladesh

Name of Programme		Purpose	Area of interventions
Cash only			
Grants – Non-Contributory & Non-Conditional	Old Age Allowance	Coping	None
	Allowances for the Widowed, Deserted and Destitute women etc.	Coping	None
	Retirement allowances for government officers/staff	Coping?	None
	Allowances for insolvent/poor amongst pre-defined target groups (disabled, freedom fighters, martyrs, mothers, homeless children, non-Bengalis, artists, etc.)	Coping	None
	Disaster relief - in cash	Coping	None
In return for services – Non-conditional	Rural Employment and Rural/Road Maintenance Programme (RMP)	Mitigation & Coping	Labour
	Cash For Work (CFW)	Mitigation & Coping	Labour
	100 days Employment Scheme	Mitigation & Coping	Labour
	Rural employment opportunity for public asset	Mitigation & Coping	Labour
In return for services – Conditional	Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP); Female Secondary School Assistance Programme (FSSAP)	Mitigation & Coping	Education service
	Female Secondary School Assistance Project/ Female Secondary Education Stipend	Mitigation & Coping	Education service
	Stipend for disabled and grants to schools for disabled	Mitigation & Coping	Education service
	Stipend for primary level students	Mitigation & Coping	Education service
	Stipend for drop-out students	Mitigation & Coping	Education service

Name of Programme		Purpose	Area of interventions
Food/Kind			
Grants – Non-Contributory & Non-Conditional	Test Relief (TR)	Coping	Food
	Gratuitous Relief (GR)	Coping	Food
	Food Assistance in CTG-Hill Tracts Area	Coping	Food
	Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)	Coping	Food
Grants- Conditional In return for services – Non-conditional	Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)	Mitigation & Coping	Food & Asset
	Food For Work (FFW)	Mitigation & Coping	Food & Labour
	Food For Education (FFE)/Cash for Education (CFE)	Mitigation & Coping	Food & education service
Services - conditional	School feeding programme under FFE/CFE	Long term Mitigation & Coping	Food & education service
Community- Non-Conditional Resource transfers	Cluster village (Climate victim rehabilitation project)	Long term Prevention	Land for housing
	Building of shelters in flood prone and river erosion areas	Coping Housing service	Housing service
	Rehabilitation of houses of landless affected by Sidr	Coping	House repair & maintenance
	Disaster Relief – materials	Coping	Specific materials
Removing exclusion (services & subsidy)			
Food	Food Subsidy for Open Market Sales (OMS)/ includes BDR shops	Coping	Food
Subsidy agriculture	Subsidize inputs to increase production	Prevention & Mitigation	Input markets
	Support to agriculture	Prevention & Mitigation	--
	Rural development project on partnership basis	--	--
Credit	Microcredit Mitigation Credit market	Mitigation	Credit market
	Credit for Low cost housing	Mitigation	Credit and housing
	Primary education related programme	Mitigation	Education service
Education	Basic education for urban working children	Mitigation	Education service
	The National Nutrition Project (NNP)	Mitigation Service	Service
Health/ Nutrition	Workers welfare fund for lactating working women	Mitigation	Service
	Maternal health voucher scheme	Mitigation	Health service
Shelter	Programme on shelter for the Poor	Mitigation & Coping	Housing service

	Name of Programme	Purpose	Area of interventions
Mixed programmes			
GOB agencies	Integrated Food Security Programme (IFSP) a component of which is UPVGD Appropriate Resources for Improving Street Children's Environment (ARISE)	Mitigation & Coping Mitigation & Coping	inter-linked inter-linked
INGO/NGO/ Fund manager	Targeting Ultra Poor – BRAC Employment for extreme poor – North Economic Empowerment of the Poor SHIREE/DFID Char Livelihoods Project – DFID	Mitigation & Coping Mitigation & Coping Mitigation & Coping Mitigation & Coping	Inter-linked Inter-linked Inter-linked Inter-linked

Note: None under 'area' column implies cash transfer that is 'neutral', that is, does not directly influence the sector-bias in household expenditure.

Source: Zohir, *et al.*, 2010; Rahman and Chowdhury, 2012.