



FOOD SECURITY IN BANGLADESH

LEGAL OBLIGATION



Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)

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Food Security in Bangladesh : Legal Obligation



Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) convened a roundtable entitled "**Food Security in Bangladesh: Legal Obligation**" on 8 April 2006 at CIRDAP auditorium. The purpose of the roundtable amongst others was to identify irregularities and gaps in the implementation of food security programs, elicit recommendations for enforcement of the right to food as well as to disseminate the research findings concerning implementation of food security programs.

The roundtable was chaired by Justice Naimuddin Ahmed, Vice Chairman, BLAST. Renowned economist Prof. M M Akash, agriculturist Dr Korban Ali, Executive Director of VOICE, and Barrister Sara Hossain also participated in the discussion.

Dr Quazi Sahahabuddin, Research Director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and Soma Islam, Deputy Director, PIL and Advocacy, BLAST presented two keynote papers, while BLAST researcher Abu Ala Mahmudul Hasan disseminated a research study on Monga.

While delivering the opening address, Mr. Taslimur Rahman, Executive Director, BLAST, appealed to the discussants to explore possible

ways out to mitigate Monga as well as to identify legal and advocacy strategies for effective implementation of food security programs in the poverty stricken areas of Bangladesh.

Soma Islam

Deputy Director
Advocacy and PIL, BLAST.

Soma Islam, in her keynote paper analyzed 'the right to food and food security' as basic human rights in the context of Monga as well as iterated salient features of the food policy and also examined the irregularities and drawbacks in the implementation of the food security policy and programs by the government. As a key recommendation, the paper suggested to consider the enactment of 'Famine Code' to mitigate the famine like situation in the northern parts of the country.

The paper is annexed herewith.

Quazi Shahabuddin

Research Director
Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Dhaka.

Quazi Shahabuddin presented a theme paper

entitled "The Right to Food: Bangladesh Perspective". The keynote paper, basically a research paper, touched upon the different aspects of food policy in Bangladesh.

In the beginning the paper focused on the human rights approach to food policy, which included, amongst others, Bangladesh's human rights commitments in ensuring adequate nutrition for its people, major requirements of the rights-based approach to food policy, as well as obligations of the State in monitoring the implementation of the food policy.

Accessibility of food was the next issue that came under discussion. The paper also touched upon issues such as availability and consumption of food, poverty trends in Bangladesh, access to food for the most vulnerable groups, intra-household distribution of nutrient intake, and public expenditure for targeted programmes.

The paper further examined the government policies and programs concerning the right to food, wherein the obligations of the government to respect, protect, and fulfill those policies and programs was also emphasized upon. NGO programmes and activities relating to food security in Bangladesh was also briefly touched upon.

Finally, after an overall assessment of the process of policy formulation, the content of policies, and monitoring and accountability procedure, the paper provided some guidelines for enhanced implementation of the right to food.

The paper is annexed herewith.

Justice Naimuddin Ahmed

Vice Chairman, BLAST

Justice Naimuddin Ahmed noted that the overwhelming majority of poor people want assistance from the government with a view to strengthening their own capacity for ensuring more food production. He suggested increasing food distribution in rural areas by reducing it in urban areas for the purpose of reaching food to the extreme poor and protecting them from Monga.

Similarly, he said, other facilities like power should be made available in rural areas by drastically restraining the luxurious use of it in urban areas.

Justice Naimuddin Ahmed opined that a strong local government system with total accountability and transparency can check the irregularities and drawbacks in the implementation of government food security policy and programmes.

Sara Hossain

Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

Sara Hossain touched upon some legal aspects of right to food and called for enactment of legislation similar to the Employment Guarantee Act in India.

As to whether a PIL is possible, Sara Hossain noted that it is important to lay hands on how concerned government authorities are infringing implementation of food security policy and programmes and collect specific information before instituting a public interest litigation.

M M Akash

Economist

Professor, Dhaka University

Prominent economist Professor M M Akash noted that it is absolutely essential to remove the inequality in distribution of land, education, health facilities and political powers for the purpose of mitigating Monga which is a time consuming and challenging job. The government should also set a specific target for this purpose, he said.

He urged for preventive and not curative action. The government should aim for creating alternative job opportunities rather than focusing on distribution of relief goods. He further observed that the price of food must be fixed at a reasonable level. He opined that dependence on land should be reduced. Overall, accountability as to all the activities must be ensured.

However, as an immediate action, he suggested

that at least one member of an extreme poor family should be given the assurance of job for around 100 days a year either in the form of agricultural or non-agricultural activities.

Mr. Korban Ali
Director, RIB

Mr. Korban Ali iterated that as the Monga situation in the northern part of the country creates a grave humanitarian crisis it is inappropriate to wait and watch the steps taken by the government including policy measures for combating Monga.

He informed that Monga is not at all a new phenomenon, but resulted in serious crisis in earlier times. Crops diversification has positively contributed in making a change in many areas which were once Monga affected.

He, as an agriculturist, suggested that the agriculture department has to identify the brands of crops which can be produced in the Monga areas round the year with a view to ensuring that the people do not face the seasonal food problem, and the government must provide all necessary technical support to produce such crops.

Hossain Al Masum
ED, JUBOK

Hussain Al Massum said there are several ways to mitigate Monga crisis. He stressed for exploring how food security can be ensured legally. He also emphasized that although people are informed about the right to food to an extent however they are quite oblivious as to how and where to claim it. He also noted that it is unfortunate that media reports point towards the

fact that Monga results in serious humanitarian crisis while the government is yet to recognize it and take effective measures for ameliorating the crisis.

In the recent years, agricultural production has increased, but income of farmers has not increased, he said. He further asked the audience why the countrymen have to live a hungry life when the government claims that sufficient grains are being produced in the country?

He also opined that poor people should not depend on agriculture alone as a source of income. He called for providing professional skills training and suggested for exploring how local products could be used. He finally stressed for wide afforestation projects in the areas affected by Monga.

Ahmed Swapan Mahmud
ED, VOICE

He called upon the participants to think whether the prevalent social structure is able to ensure food for all. He also lamented that our food culture has changed and people are becoming extravagant on food. While some people are spending a lot on fast food and drinks, others are striving against hunger, he noted. It is very sad that the people who are producing grains are passing their days without one meal a day, he said.

He urged NGOs to take serious steps for ensuring food security rather than remaining confined to seminars and workshops where issues are discussed and then conveniently forgotten.

Keynote Paper

Right to Food and Freedom from Hunger as Fundamental Human Rights

Soma Islam

Deputy Director
Advocacy and PIL, BLAST.

Background

Adequate food intake is important for our survival as well as physical and mental growth. A healthy population is prerequisite for a developed economy. In Bangladesh, food security remains a huge challenge given an overwhelming majority of its population lives below the line of poverty and is chronically undernourished. Hunger or malnourishment may be caused by war, drought, natural disaster or poverty. Irrespective of its cause, hunger continues to contribute in widespread sufferings of the people and social unrest. It also hinders overall development of any country.



Agrarian crisis and inadequate employment generation in Bangladesh have accounted for lack of purchasing power of the poor which in turn impedes food security. Inadequate food security poses a serious threat to achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving its people living on less than US\$1 per day from 58.8% in the year 1991 to 29.4% by 2015.

Starvation of people for whatever reason is not acceptable in any civilised society. International covenants and State laws recognise people's 'right to food' and 'freedom from hunger' as fundamental human rights and require the States to ensure that people do not starve under any circumstances. States are required to adopt proper policies and mechanisms to ensure access to food for all.

This note aims to discuss right to food as a fundamental human right and 'food security' as a collective responsibility of the State and the society as a whole in the context of "Monga"¹ in Bangladesh. In the discussion international covenants, constitutional provisions as well as food policy and food security programmes of the government will be analysed.

Right to food as a fundamental human right

The United Nations first identified access to food as "both individual right and collective responsibility."² The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 incorporates:

*"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food ... and right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."*³

Later on, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966 recognised that everyone has the right to adequate food and that it is "the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger".⁴ This right is intrinsically linked to the right to life,⁵ which is an inalienable fundamental right guaranteed under our Constitution.⁶

Leaders from 185 countries at the '1996 World Food Summit' and the European Community in the Rome Declaration on World Food Security reaffirmed:

"the right of everyone to have access to safe and

1. Monga is a famine like situation that occurs during the months of September to December, especially, in the northern districts of Bangladesh. 2. <http://www.fao.org/FOCUS/E/rightfood/right1.html>, 3. Article 25 (1), 4. Article 11, 5. Please see footnote 2, 6. Article 32

*nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.*⁷

The Constitution of Bangladesh requires the State to ensure people's access to basic necessities including food, clothing, shelter and medical care as one of the Fundamental Principles of State Policies.⁸ The State is also obligated to:

*"regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties..."*⁹

With a view to removing the disparity between the urban and rural areas, the State is duty bound to "adopt effective measures to bring about radical transformation in the rural areas."¹⁰ The framers of the Constitution were concerned about the disparity of wealth among the people which might lead to social anomaly. They incorporated provisions regarding State's obligation to:

*"adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality ... and ensure equitable distribution of wealth among the citizens and of opportunities..."*¹¹

The Constitution recognises 'work' as a right of each capable citizen and guarantees payment for work according to a person's abilities and according to his work.¹² The Constitution discourages people living on unearned income and requires the State to create conditions in which human labour, both intellectual and physical:

*"shall become a fuller expression of creative endeavour and of the human personality."*¹³

The Constitution also guarantees right to equality before law¹⁴ and equal protection of law¹⁵ for all. These are inalienable rights of every citizen and any other person for the time being in the country. In case of violation of any fundamental right, the aggrieved people can recourse to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court under Article 102 of the Constitution to enforce their rights.¹⁶

In view of the above, the government adopted Food Policy 1988 with, among others, the following objectives:

(a) *To encourage the farmers in producing more food grains by purchasing their produces at a*

*fair/subsidised price.*¹⁷

(b) *To ensure proper supply and distribution of food grains that are produced, collected from other sources, if necessary, or imported.*¹⁸

(c) *To ensure access to food grains for the low income, poor and destitute people, through various development activities.*¹⁹

(d) *To ensure stability in food price in line with the production cost as well as people's purchase power.*²⁰

(e) *To create a food security reserve to deal with disaster situations of the country and to ensure control over the price hike of food grains (English translation supplied).*²¹

According to Rule 8 of the Food Rules 1988:

"Food distribution will be increased in the rural areas by reducing supply in the urban areas. To achieve this objective, revised rationing as well as Open Market Sale (OMS) systems shall be made more effective. Emphasis will be given to programmes like food for work and food distribution among the destitute etc." (English translation supplied).

"Monga" and food security programmes of the government

Monga is a local term used in the northern districts of Bangladesh to describe a famine like situation that occurs during the lean period of the year. It is a direct outcome of the seasonal lack of employment due to the gap in the plantation and harvesting of crops and absence of any non-agricultural employment during the period. Landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmers and char (sand bank) residents are the worst affected victims of Monga.

Monga has become a recurring phenomenon in northern Bangladesh. About 4 million people were affected by Monga in the year 2005 alone. Monga leads to severe human sufferings including malnutrition, destitution, starvation, diarrhoea and death. A total of 44 people succumbed to Monga in the year 2005. Monga situation could be avoided with sound food security programme and provision for non-agricultural employment opportunities for the Monga victims.

To ensure food security, Rule 27 of the Food Rules provide as follows:

7. Please see footnote 2, 8. Article 15(a), 9. Article 18(1), 10. Article 16, 11. Article 19(2), 12. Article 20 (1), 13. Article 20 (2), 14. Article 27, 15. Article 31, 16. Article 44, 17. Objective (b), 18. Objective (c), 19. Objective (d), 20. Objective (e), 21. Objectives (g)

"Throughout the country endeavour shall be made to store food grains necessary for at least one month in the granaries of the Ministry of Food to handle crop loss and its consequences following drought, flood, cyclone etc. In this regard, efforts shall be made to store significant part of reserve through internal collection."

Rule 28 of the Food Rules further provides:

"Ministry of Food and Ministry for Relief will undertake various productive activities to increase the nutrition level of the families that are suffering from malnourishment due to low income and gradually becoming incapable in the labour market."

According to Rule 29 of the Food Rules:

"Every year Ministry for Relief and Rehabilitation shall undertake food for work and VGD programmes and try to increase distribution in these sectors."

Over the years, the government has undertaken various food programmes. These are briefly discussed below:

Kajer Binimoye Khaddo or KABIKHA (Food for Work):

KABIKHA was started in 1975 as a part of the Public Food Distribution System. It is the largest of all food grain distribution channels of the country. Under this programme food grains are stored in every district. Initially, the programme was meant to distribute relief (food grains donated to the country) to people facing severe food insecurity. Later on, the main objectives have been changed to include the following:

- (a) to improve performance of agricultural sector through construction and maintenance of rural infrastructure i.e., road, bridge, irrigation canals, river ghats etc.
- (b) to reduce damage on human life and property caused by flood, cyclone, river erosion etc. through building embankments, cyclone shelters.
- (c) to generate seasonal employment for the rural poor.

Under this programme payment for work is often made in kind (food grain) rather than in cash with a view to ensuring stability in food price and improving food consumption and nutrition of the beneficiaries.

Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)

VGD programme was undertaken with the assistance of World Food Programme with a view to:

- (a) Enhance income-earning capacity and self-reliance

of ultra-poor and food-insecure women in order to ensure their graduation into mainstream development programme; and

- (b) Improve the nutritional status of malnourished women and children.

The long-term objective is to strengthen its focus on nutrition to ensure that socio-economic achievements are translated into improved nutritional status for women and their children. Under VGD, the beneficiaries are required to be selected based on at least four of the following:

- (a) people consuming less than two full meals.
- (b) owning less than 0.15 acre of land.
- (c) people with very poor housing conditions.
- (d) extremely low and irregular family income.
- (e) households headed by a woman with no adult male earning member and no other source of income.

Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)

According to "VGF Activities Implementation

Guidelines 2004", the main objectives of VGF include the following:

- (a) to ensure food security for the poor and destitute.
- (b) to help prevent nutrition decrease of the poor and children.
- (c) to stabilise the food grain price.
- (d) to provide food support to the poor people during lean period.
- (e) to contribute towards poverty reduction of the country through helping beneficiaries in the improvement of their social and economic life.

According to the VGF guidelines, following people are eligible for VGF cards:

- (a) daily labourers, temporary labourers, or people with irregular earnings or very little or no family earnings.
- (b) people with no or less than 0.15 acre of land.
- (c) wives of physically challenged husbands, physically challenged people.
- (d) victims of river erosion, flood, land slide or other natural disasters.

According to the guidelines, a VGD card holder, or a person receiving any kind of support from other

government or non-government organisations are not eligible for VGF card. Only one card can be issued in favour of a person per family.

In addition to KABIKA, VGD and VGF Programmes, there are **Khoyrati Sahajjo** (government relief) or **GR, Kajer Binimoye Sahajjo** (Test Relief or Relief for Work) or **TR and School Feeding Programme** etc. The **Food for Education** program deserves special mention as a positive policy measure of the government with a specific gender dimension to it. Acknowledging the fact that young girls in poor households are disproportionately deprived of food, the government has introduced the feeding programme in schools. The programme has also been aimed at achieving 100% literacy and encouraging primary education for children especially girls of poor families. The government has productively linked food security need to increased enrolment in schools through this programme.

Implementing agencies for government food security programmes

With the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management at the top, various government and local government agencies are involved in implementing government food security programmes. Their respective responsibilities are discussed below:

Ministry of Food and Disaster Management is responsible for:

- (a) sending all sort of government orders regarding TR, KABIKA, VGF and other relief materials to all districts, municipalities, upazillas and concerned agencies; and
- (b) policy formulation (determining per head allocation of food grains, number of VGD, VGF cards etc. per Upazilla) implementation and monitoring of food security programmes.

Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs is responsible for implementation of Union Parishad (UP) VGD programme.

Ministry of LGRD and Cooperatives is responsible for control and overseeing of the local administration in the implementation of government food security programmes.

At Upazilla level, the **Upazilla Women's Affairs Officer** and **Upazilla Disaster Management and Relief Officer** are responsible for distribution of VGD programme.

Union Parishads, the lowest tier of the local government institutions, are most directly involved with the rural level implementation of government programmes. Among others, UPs are responsible for:

- (a) agricultural, industrial and community development within each union,
- (b) making rules and regulations for the purpose of alleviation of chronic economic crisis and food insecurity,
- (c) implementing UP VGD, VGF Programmes.
- (d) distributing relief goods to persons in distress.
- (e) developing local infrastructure i.e. roads, bridge, culverts, irrigation canals etc.

Under the VGF programme, the UPs are responsible for preparing the list for VGF beneficiaries, helping in the issuance of VGF cards by the Upazilla Committees, drawing and distributing food grains in time and preserving VGF cards.

In addition to the above, City Corporations and Municipalities are also involved in the implementation of the food security programmes.

Mismanagement in food procurement system

The Food Policy 1988 provides for following:

- (a) Based on the target production, the Ministry of Food will prepare the food budget at the beginning of each year and frame the import policy after calculating the deficit. The Ministry of Food shall build stores of food on the basis of population of the country and demand for food grains.²²
- (b) To ensure control on the market price and increase supply, the Food Ministry shall distribute necessary food grains through various food distribution channels.²³

Reportedly, the concerned ministry, department, agencies and bodies are not able to properly manage the food procurement system. They do not comply with the provisions of the Food Policy.

In addition the food grains distribution system is grossly faulty. Nepotism and corruption such as political bias and favouritism are frequently reported.²⁴ There is no legislative measure in place to control the food price or to mitigate the threat of Monga.²⁵ In the absence of proper monitoring and regulation, the businessmen tend to create syndicate

22. Clause 4, 23. Clause 7, 24. The Daily Janakantha 27 October 2005, 25. Daily Bhorer Kagoj 24 October 2005.

or cartel and influence price of the food grains. Lack of coordination and failure to take timely and effective decisions for release and disbursement of existing funds and relief also causes delay in implementation of existing food security programme.²⁶

Lack of accountability with respect to implementation of food security programmes as well as lack of appropriate targeting and delivery to the most affected communities is blamed for poor performance of the programmes. Upazilla Parishads often fail to comply with their obligations to administer social welfare programmes, undertake overall development and planning and to ensure distribution of food grains and relief goods to people in distress.²⁷ The UPs tend to flout guidelines related to UP VGD and VGF Programmes. On the contrary, they are blamed for bias and favouritism in the distribution of VGD and VGF cards.²⁸ They are also blamed for misappropriating VGD, VGF and KABIKA resources. Giving lesser food grains than the approved quantity is also reported.

Concluding remarks

On recognition of the "Right to Food" as a fundamental human right and "Food Security" as a collective responsibility of the State and the society as a whole, this note suggests the following steps to be undertaken by the government, civil society and rights groups.

1. Institution of Public Interest Litigation:

A Public Interest Litigation may be instituted in the High Court Division of the Supreme Court seeking directives to:

- a) *appoint an independent commission comprising relevant experts to submit a status report on the Monga situation along with the ameliorative measures undertaken by the concerned government authorities including procedures for distribution of relief, and obstacles in implementation of food security programmes with recommendations for more effective implementation.*
- b) *implement schemes for providing employment to at least one member per household in the Monga*

affected areas at a minimum wage.

- c) *submit a periodic report to the Court on the initiatives taken to mitigate Monga situation.*

2. Legislative Advocacy

Comprehensive legislative advocacy may be conducted to undertake employment assurance programme by the government. Recurrence of Monga also merits for the enactment of a Relief Code with the purpose of codifying relief operations in order to enforce relief and rehabilitation measures effectively in the State especially in the northern areas. The government may be pursued to adopt proper policy for regulation of food grain market. Rights based organisations, civil society, NGOs and media can play an important role in this regard.

3. Awareness campaigns

There is no alternative to information for successful implementation of any programme. Civil society, NGOs and media can carry out comprehensive awareness programme on the right to food, food security as well as consumption of alternative foods. Through awareness campaigns the concerned authorities may be sensitised to undertake preventive measures to mitigate Monga situation including creation of non-agricultural employment opportunities through small enterprise development, cottage industries and imparting training on skilled and semi-skilled work to the rural people.

4. Coordination between government and non-government initiatives

In addition to government programmes, various NGOs, Micro-finance Institutions, civil society members and other non-governmental agencies contribute significantly in helping people to survive in the wake of natural or man-made disasters. Through proper coordination, the relief activities can be more effectively carried out. For example, situation like some people receiving support from all quarters while others remaining disproportionately deprived of access to basic rights for survival can be avoided.

26. The Daily Ittefaq 21 November 2005, 27. The Daily Janakantha 30 October 2005, 28. Daily Amar Desh 2 November 2005

The Right to Food : Bangladesh Perspective

Quazi Shahabuddin

Research Director, BIDS

I. INTRODUCTION

There is an emerging consensus in the world community that the right to development is a fundamental human right for all citizens of a country. Bangladesh has also committed itself to such a view : "The Right to Development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedom can be fully realized" (Article 1 of the 1986 Declaration of the Right to Development). In fact, Bangladesh as a signatory to the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, has committed itself to implementing the Declaration on the Right to Development adopted by the United Nations in 1986. Although neither Declaration has the legally binding status of a Treaty, the moral force of the universal consensus underlying Vienna Declaration enjoins upon the State the obligation to fulfill the commitments laid out in these Declarations.¹

In reality, however, a large majority of the people in Bangladesh is still deprived of basic economic and social rights: the right to adequate food and shelter, health, education and other basic needs. Poor in Bangladesh do not even meet the minimum nutritional requirement to maintain a healthy body. Hence poverty in Bangladesh is synonymous with hunger and malnutrition.² Hunger, as is well known, is not simply an economic problem in the narrow sense, but more importantly, it has social and political dimensions as well. "It does not, of course, really matter whether political, social and cultural influences on economic matters are counted inside or outside the discipline of economics, but it can be tremendously important not to lose sight of these influences in analyzing many of the profoundly economic problems. This is particularly the case with the problems of hunger" (Sen and Dreze, 1991).

An attempt has been made in this paper to evaluate the performance of Bangladesh on the implementation of the right to food in the light of the commitments made by the State. In particular, the study would examine whether the process of policy formulation, implementation and monitoring are consistent with the requirements of the right-based approach, and whether the goals and targets set by policies are in conformity with the targets to which the State has committed itself in the process of signing various human rights instruments. In order to be consistent with the rights-based approach, the analysis would focus on certain characteristics such as participation by stakeholders and progressive realization of rights in the process of policy formulation, setting of target and priorities, emphasis on the principles of equity and non-discrimination, and accountability. Needless to emphasize, the process is as important as the outcome in the rights-based approach to development.

The Human Rights Approach to Food Policy has been described in Section II of this paper. The policies and projects involving the right to food in Bangladesh are discussed in Section III. An assessment of achievements from the perspective of rights-based approach to development has been made in Section IV. Section V suggests possible directions that the State of Bangladesh need to follow for enhanced implementation of the right to food in the country.

¹ Besides, Bangladesh has made legally binding commitment to implement various elements of human rights that together make up the concept of the right to development. Thus, in 1998, it ratified the crucial International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1986). It has earlier ratified other important Conventions such as International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In addition, by signing the Declarations of various World Summits on specific issues such as food security, health and education, Bangladesh has undertaken to strive towards achieving universally agreed goals in these areas.

² In 2000, about 50 percent of the people in Bangladesh are classified as poor based on national poverty line (BBS, 2001)

II. THE HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO FOOD POLICY

For an analysis of the right to food in Bangladesh, it is important to look at the country's commitment to human rights, particularly the right to food. This means both examining the national obligation concerning the right to food to which the government is committed and Bangladesh's ratification of the international conventions which includes specific commitment to the right to food including any reservations.

II.1 Bangladesh's Human Rights Commitments in Food

The Constitution of Bangladesh (Article 15) recognizes the fundamental responsibility of the state to secure to its citizens the provision of the basic necessities of life including food. There is, therefore, a clear commitment on the part of the State to ensure access of food to those who are in need of it most.

The Commission on Human rights has repeatedly affirmed that hunger constitutes an outrage and a violation of human dignity. There is no disagreement that the right to food and nutrition is a core human right. Bangladesh is a signatory to the Vienna declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 and has expressed its commitment to implementing the Declaration on the Right to Development adopted by the United Nations in 1986. Moreover, Bangladesh has made legally binding commitment to implementing the right to development through ratifying International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) in 1998. This is the most important human rights instrument for the right to food as it enshrines the right to food and the right to be free from hunger in its article 11. Article 11(2) of the Covenant states that the State Parties to the present Covenant, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international cooperation the measures including special programmes. This means that the Government has committed itself to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food.³ The obligation to respect is as negative freedom- it puts limits on the ability of the State to take action that would threaten people's existing access to food, such as taking away of their land. The obligation to protect the right to food means that the Government must protect its people against others seeking to violate their right to food. Finally, the obligation to fulfill means that the Government must take positive action to actively identify vulnerable groups and implement policies to enable them to feed themselves. The government must create an enabling environment to ensure adequate food to all. In the final analysis, the Government is responsible for assisting those whose food security is threatened for reasons beyond their control. The Government would violate its obligation if it let people when they are in desperate need and have no means of feeding themselves. The right to food also prohibits discrimination in access to food on the basis of race, color, sex, language, religion etc.

As mentioned above, Bangladesh has ratified or acceded to a number of UN Treaties and Conventions which constitute important commitments of the country to the United Nations. In the 1990s, building on the themes of earlier international conferences and UN resolutions, quite a few major World Conferences and Summits have been held. The Declarations and Plans of Actions unanimously adopted in such Conferences and Summits should also be considered as equally binding on every participating nation including Bangladesh. From the perspective of the right to food, the World Food Summit of 1996 deserves special mention. Leaders from 186 member States of FAO met in Rome in 1996 and made the declaration to have the number of 800 million hungry people by the year 2015. Based on this Declaration, the World Food Summit (WFS) Plan of Action was drawn up to implement seven commitments in order to attain the objective stated above. The Ministry of Food, as the lead agency, is entrusted with the responsibility of the follow-up actions in Bangladesh.

³ These obligations have been fully outlined in the Special Rapporteur's report to the General Assembly (A/56/210).

The 1996 WFS rightly initiated the step towards better defining the right to food and matters associated thereto. There is a general misconception that ensuring the right to food is the sole responsibility of the State. It is not. This is reflected in article 20 of the General Comment (May, 1999) on the right to adequate food of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: "while only states are parties to the Covenant and are thus ultimately accountable for compliance with it, all members of the Society- individuals, families, local communities, non-government organizations, civil society organization, as well as the private business sector- have responsibilities in the realization to adequate food. The State should provide an environment that facilitates implementation of these responsibilities". In other words, while it is the primary responsibility of the State to ensure the right to adequate food, it also remains the responsibility of the civil society and the international community to support and complement State action, especially in times of disasters.

II.2 Major Requirements of the Rights-Based Approach to Food Policy⁴

The major characteristics of the rights-based approach to food essentially involves three aspects of a policy regime. These are: (a) the process of policy formulation, (b) the content of policies and (c) the monitoring of policy implementation. Some of the major characteristics related to each of these three aspects are discussed below.

Process of Policy Formulation

The process of policy formulation need to possess two important sets of characteristics, namely (a) Participation by stakeholders and (b) Progressive realization of rights in order to fulfill the requirements of the rights-based approach. One of the significant characteristics of a rights-based approach to policy formulation is that it should be participatory in nature. People who are affected by policies should be involved in the process of policy making. They should have a say in the nature and type of policy that is formulated.⁵ The nature of this participation may be diverse in form and shape, but three must exist institutions, that allow genuine participation of the affected people in shaping of policies.

The notion of progressive realization of rights constitutes the second set of characteristics relevant at the stage of policy formulation. In view of resource constraints, many rights including the rights to food can only be fulfilled over a period of time in a progressive manner. The recognition of the need for progressive realization, however, does not give the State a license to defer or relax the efforts needed to realize rights. On the other hand, the State is obliged to ensure that its efforts are satisfactory in some well-defined sense. In particular, the process of progressive realization should have the following characteristics.

First, the State must take steps at the earliest to fulfill the rights as expeditiously as possible by developing and implementing a time-bound plan of action. The plan must spell out when and how the State hopes to achieve the full realization of rights.

Second, the plan must include a sequence of intermediate, preferably annual, targets. These intermediate targets should serve as benchmark, against which the success or failure of the State will be judged.

⁴ This sub-section draws heavily on the Methodology outlined in Osmani et al. (2002).

⁵ It is recognized, however, that the affected people may not always be able or even willing to participate directly in discussion on all the details of all kinds of policies. Some policies may be more amenable to direct participation, w.g. those that are formulated at the community level through some form of local level governance. In other cases, participation can only be indirect, through representatives-elected or otherwise.

Contents of Rights-Based Policies

In the context of rights-based approach, the contents of policies refers to the goals and targets that are set by the State, the resources that are committed for the realization of those targets and the methods that are adopted to achieve them. It is recognized that fixing targets and committing resources for them will necessarily involve setting priorities, which in turn will involve consideration of trade-off among alternative goals. Both these activities i.e. acts of setting priorities and accepting trade-offs must necessarily involve some value judgements. These value judgements must be shaped by the human rights norms for a policy regime to be consistent with the rights-based approach.⁶ Such norms involve several requirements such as the principles of equity and non-discrimination, conformity with human rights instruments, and an integrated approach such that the complementarities among various rights can be realized.

Monitoring of Implementation

The very notion of rights implies the notion of duties or obligations. For example, when a state ratifies a treaty that enshrines the right to food, it undertakes a duty or an obligation to fulfill that right. But a duty can only be meaningful if the duty-bearer can be held accountable for failing to perform its duty.⁷ The need to ensure accountability is, therefore, centrally important for the rights-based approach to development. The emphasis on accountability in turn entails that the process of monitoring of policy implementation must possess a number of characteristics: (a) mechanisms through which the culpability of the State can be assessed in case of failure to adopt and implement appropriate policies (b) accountability procedures must be participatory in nature so that citizens, especially those directly affected by policies are able to hold the State accountable for its actions. (c) there must exist procedures to hold the external actors- such as donor community, international NGOs, multinational corporations etc.- accountable for their role in influencing the realization of rights of any country's citizens, and (d) certain correlated rights- such as the right to information, the right to access to justice etc.- that were important for effective participation are also essential in the context of accountability.

II.3 Obligations of the State

The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means of its procurement. The right to adequate food shall, therefore, not be interpreted in narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with a minimum package of calories, proteins or other specific nutrients. The right to adequate food will have to be realized progressively. However, the States have a core obligation to take the necessary action to mitigate and alleviate hunger as provided for in para 2 of article 11 of the Covenant, even in times of natural or other disasters.

The General Comment of the Committee (CESCR) expresses the core content of the right to adequate food as follows (para 8):

- The availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture.
- The accessibility of such food in ways that are sustainable and that do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights.

⁶ The principles set out in various human rights instruments and the deliberations of various treaty bodies provide the normative framework from which one can derive the value-judgements that are consistent with the rights-based approach.

⁷ As observed earlier, the duty of the State in respect of any right is of three kinds: the duty to respect, the duty to protect, and the duty to fulfill, which in turn two components- to facilitate and to provide. The rights-based approach to development demands that it must be possible to hold the State accountable for each element of these duties.

The content of "adequacy" is to some extent determined by prevailing social, economic, cultural, climatic, ecological and other conditions, but there are some core elements which are applicable under all circumstances and are spelled out in greater detail by the Committee. "Sustainability" incorporates the notion of long-term availability and accessibility and is intrinsically linked to the notion of adequate food or food security, implying food being accessible for both present and future generations.

III. POLICIES AND PROGRAMS INVOLVING THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN BANGLADESH

In order to implement the right to development, the State will have to formulate a set of programmes and policies, keeping in view the interrelationship among individual rights and by adopting a genuine participatory process. The question still remains as to what kind of actions the State will have to take so as to meet their obligations as the principal duty bearer. In the human rights literature, the obligations for the State has been specified at three levels as mentioned earlier: the obligations to respect, the obligations to protect, and the obligations to fulfill (to facilitate and to provide) human rights. The types of action that the State is required to take follow from these three types of obligations. The steps taken by the Government of Bangladesh so far in terms of different policies and programs in each of these three areas are discussed below.

III.I Government Policies and Programs

Obligation to Respect

This particular obligation, as we observed earlier, is generally important in a negative way-when the state actually deprives some segment of the population of its rights consciously and deliberately, e.g. by withholding food from some groups during a civil war. This is obviously not relevant in the context of Bangladesh and hence the state cannot be blamed on this ground.¹⁷

Obligation to Protect

The relevant issue in this case e.g. the obligation to protect is whether the State is protecting those whose right to food might be threatened by some third parties. This in turn leads to the question in what way might any third party be threatening somebody's right to food? There are at least two possibilities that one can think of that may be relevant in the context of Bangladesh. One possibility is that the village elite may unlawfully grab the land of the poor. In that context, the obligation would require the State to ensure proper land registration and enforcement of land rights. Another possibility is unlawful eviction of tenants or forcing the tenants to accept exploitative terms of contracts. The protect obligation would then naturally call for appropriate tenancy reforms. The steps taken by the Government of Bangladesh in both these areas are discussed below.

There has been several attempts at land and tenancy reforms in Bangladesh but the provisions have remained in paper due to poor performance in implementation. Complicated land administration and poor maintenance of records of landownership is a source of litigation and harassment for resource-poor households, specially in the rural areas. In fact, reform of land administration is an issue of serious concern. Not only in the past, even now land is central to the dynamic of social and economic life of Bangladesh. The current structure of land administration is built around three core functions: (a) record keeping (b) registration and (c) settlement.

¹⁷ There may be instances, however, where the government in times of natural disasters has not distributed relief materials, specially food where they are needed most on political considerations.

At the lowest tier, the function of record-keeping is the jurisdiction of Tahsil Office, while that of registration is that of the sub-registrar's office. There is an altogether different office which handles the function of settlement. The major problem here is that ownership rights are being recorded in different offices, each of which is located in completely different executive processes.¹⁸ So we have a situation where official record of ownership rights are being generated in three unconnected executive processes, one of which i.e. settlement is moreover functionally redundant. This in a nutshell is the source of all the ills of land administration in Bangladesh (Rahman, 1994).

In fact, the multiplicity of documents or records of rights is the fundamental flaw in the system of land administration. It should be noted, however, that even the multiplicity of documents might not have been a problem if they were based on a systematic procedure of cross-check. Unfortunately, such is not the case. What is extraordinary is that the law itself expressly forbids any crosschecks on the authenticity of land transaction. This leads to the most serious problem with land administration- the problem of false records, which are perhaps the major factor behind the endemic nature of land disputes in Bangladesh.¹⁹

The interesting point here is that while the above flaws in land administration are generating tremendous complication within society, the solutions to such a flawed system are relatively obvious, and straightforward (Rahman, 1994). For example, with regard to settlement, it is clear that such an office is by now historically redundant and should be immediately phased out. This may sound extreme but even a moment's thought will make it abundantly clear that such an office continues to exist solely by virtue of administrative inertia. If it were abolished tomorrow, it would entail no loss to society. On the other hand, efficiency of land administration would receive a significant boost because one major source of false record creation would be removed.

There is simple solution regarding other two offices as well (Rahman, 1994). This solution entails establishing better coordination between the functions of record keeping and registration. In the late 1980s, an administrative reorganization committee, commonly referred to as the Muyeed Committee, proposed a solution whereby the functions of record-keeping and registration are brought within a single executive process at the field level i.e. tahsil and sub-registrar's office both to come within the jurisdiction of a single executive officer, the Assistant Commissioner (Land). The major objective would be ensure a cross check at the state of registration on the authenticity of the deed being transacted. There could be other models to ensure this objective besides that proposed by the Muyeed Committee. But the important issue is to pursue this objective. Unfortunately, even though the solution here is relatively simple one, it has not yet materialized. One reason for this is that discussion on these issues is very limited. Moreover, many vested interests have historically grown up who oppose these solutions. Such vested interests are not necessarily only among the rich, they may also be amongst low-income functionaries, including the redundant functionaries such as deed writers who are well organized and function as pressure groups to prevent rationalization of land administration. Thus the archaic land records system, cumbersome land registration procedures with entrenched vested interests to oppose their rationalization stand in the way of developing an efficient land administration system. This obviously has an important bearing on enforcing land rights and hence right to food in rural Bangladesh.

¹⁸ Tahsil office has a claim in command extending to the Ministry of land, while the Sub-registrar's office follows a chain in command extending to the Ministry of Law. Similar is the case with Settlement.

¹⁹ It is estimated that upto 80 per cent of court cases in rural areas are related to these conflicts which are often identified for creating a major "downward mobility" pressure particularly for small and marginal farmers (BIDS Survey results reported in Rahman et al. 1995).

It may be emphasized here that the accomplishments of the tasks pertaining to land management and administration require the participation of the people at the local level. Local government bodies, NGOs, civil societies and peasant organization can help ensure such participation. They also provide support in developing projects, identifying and selecting beneficiaries, in organizing cohesive groups and motivating them in the right direction. In this regard, mutual cooperation of GO and NGO is needed which has taken place in the past. For example, in a government-initiated project of Adarsha Gram where NGO workers and the government of Bangladesh officers worked jointly to distribute khas land and construct houses for rehabilitation of about two lakhs distressed people in more than one thousand villages on a permanent basis. Such experiences of mutual cooperation between GO and NGO have been useful for the Ministry of Land for taking a number of other development project focusing on char development and credit scheme. But the important point is that such a process of mutual cooperation has so far been not institutionalized (Saha, 2000-01).

The traditional land system of Bangladesh is one in which a dominant minority of landholders have secured rights to land whereas the majority in rural areas have either tenuous rights to land or no land at all. Those having secured rights to land seldom perform labour on it or make investments in its improvement. Instead, they have assigned labour and investment functions to actual tillers, who can be evicted by the superior landholder at will. Within the framework of this system, with ownership and control of land traditionally separated from labour and investment, neither the owner nor the tiller of the soil has a strong incentive to increase productivity.

It may be mentioned here that the Land Reforms Ordinance in 1984 has incorporated provisions in safeguarding the interests of tenants. However, the non-implementation of the provisions, in the absence of effective measures, appear to be the essential feature of the Ordinance (Saha, 2000-2001).²⁰ The fact remains that sharecropping and other forms of tenancy agreements are almost exclusively verbal agreement in rural Bangladesh. In the absence of written agreements, tenants have no security of tenure. The landlord can evict any tenant whenever he considers it necessary thereby violating the right of tenants for earning his livelihood and ultimately his right to food.²¹

A comparison of 1996 Agricultural Census with 1983-84 Census indicates that the proportion of area under tenancy has been observed to increase from about 17 per cent of operated area in 1983-84 to about 22 per cent in 1996. However, there has been a dramatic change in the structure of tenurial arrangements.²² This may largely be attributed to the dissemination of relatively risk-free irrigated HYV boro rice in the winter season. What implications this might have on security of tenancy merit serious investigation.

²⁰ The Land Reform Ordinance of 1984 was promulgated with a view to maximizing production and ensuring a better relationship between landholders (having permanent occupancy rights over land in their possession) and sharecroppers. Enhancing the legal status and rights of sharecroppers was not an explicit purpose of the Ordinance. Nevertheless, the 1984 Ordinance accord de jure status and rights—although extremely qualified by their terms—to this category of actual tillers who, in the modern history of the region, have not enjoyed any such status and rights. However, it is almost impossible to enforce provisions of the Ordinance that would confer new status and rights to sharecroppers, given the existing distribution of power, legal and de facto, in rural Bangladesh. In fact a review of the main features of the 1984 Ordinance will confirm that the Ordinance was written in such a way as to make many of its principal provisions either unenforceable or meaningless (Jannuzi and Peach, 1994).

²¹ In the face of competition for land in the rental market, the bargaining power of tenants is reduced to a great extent so much so that they helplessly become dependent on the landlords. On the other hand, if they fail to get a piece of land from their landlord, they are reduced to the rank of agricultural labourer which may be considered to be more degrading. In these circumstances, the poor peasants strive for rented land, even though the return on sharecropper's labour is lower than the market wage rate in most cases (Hossain 1981 and 1989).

²² In fact, the area under share tenancy has declined from 74 per cent in 1983/84 to about 62 per cent in 1996, whereas area under fixed rent and other tenancy arrangements has increased from about 26 per cent of 38 per cent, over the same period.

Jannuzi and Peach (1990) advocated for a particular kind of land reform in Bangladesh- one having the limited objective of confirming secured rights in land to one category of actual tillers, those currently classified as sharecroppers or bargadars. Such a reform would also aim at taking away rights to land from landholders in Bangladesh who do not reside on their land and who do not invest personally in the agricultural production process or perform labour on the land. The definition of agrarian reform as perceived by Jannuzi and Peach (1990) is not synonymous with "land reform", if "land reform" were defined as a panacea by which existing land resources would be redistributed in Bangladesh to provide landholdings to all possible claimants of rights to land. Their overriding concern is for an agrarian reform that focus on changing the tradition in Bangladesh by which landholder's control of land is divorced from their direct involvement in agricultural operations. This means taking steps to establish conditions in the countryside to ensure that secure rights in land are conferred only on persons who are prepared to perform manual labour on the land and to assume the costs and risks of agricultural operations. The most meaningful agrarian reforms, therefore, would be one wherein the principle was established that landholders enjoying secured rights in land would (i) reside on their lands (2) invest personally in the agricultural production process and (3) perform manual labour (themselves and their families) on their lands. This would mean denying all rights in land to landholders who customarily give out land on a share-tenancy basis to others. This would mean conferring effective permanent occupancy rights on the actual tillers of the soil.

Obligation to Fulfill (Facilitate)

The obligation to fulfill (facilitate) means the State must pro-actively engage in activities intended to strengthen people's access to and utilization of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food security. In this context, the pursuit of a pro-poor growth strategy so that the poor can earn enough to buy the food they need assumes special significance.

With a low level of per capita income and slow growth in key social indicators, Bangladesh needs to adopt a multi-strategy solution for poverty reduction. Within the strategy, economic growth matters for reducing both income and non income poverty. In particular, a pro-poor or broad-based growth is necessary so that increasing benefits for the poor are generated. A comparison of the growth rates over different sub-periods with corresponding changes in the incidence of poverty reveals some links between growth and poverty. The evidence suggests that declining poverty, in general, is associated with relatively high GDP growth originating in agriculture.

In terms of structure and sectoral composition of economic growth, the poverty-reducing role of agriculture seems to be important. The poor mostly live in rural areas and depend on agricultural activities for their livelihood. The growth of agriculture has several advantages in accelerating overall growth and creating a growth structure that contributes to raising the poor's income. The impact of agricultural growth on rural wages is an important element in the process since, for the poor households, a major share of income originates from wage

labour in agricultural and non-agricultural activities. A high agricultural growth also creates synergies for diversification of the rural economy and development of the rural non-farm sector with greater poverty reduction impact. It is, therefore, important for Bangladesh to accelerate growth of agricultural and non-farm sector, improve coverage and quality of social services, ensure well-functioning rural institutions, and expand rural infrastructure (Mujeri, 2000).

The characteristics of poverty and growth linkages in the Bangladesh economy indicate that rapid agricultural growth is necessary in accelerating economic growth and creating a structure of growth that has a high capacity to reduce poverty. The past performance of agriculture, influenced by two major factors, points to the need to reconsider the strategies in view of emerging development in the agriculture sector. First, policy reforms- both macroeconomic and sector specific- have initiated significant changes in incentive structures within agriculture and between agriculture and nonagriculture sectors. The empirical evidence indicates that the policy changes, on the whole, have created positive impact and contributed to increased production. The reform agenda, however, has fallen short of targets in certain cases due to several factors e.g. lack of social consensus, incomplete and selective implementation, backsliding of the reform process, inadequate design and sequencing of reforms, emphasis on achieving quantitative targets without facilitating institutional reforms, and politicizing of the reform agenda. Sustained improvements in agriculture require the Government to pursue pragmatic reforms and adopt a set of

clearly defined criteria, based on priorities of agricultural development and sound economic rationale for public sector involvement, for allocating public resources and mobilizing private initiatives. Second, while the past focus of policies on cereals (e.g. rice) has paid large dividends, it is unlikely to provide a sustainable engine of agricultural growth in future. The emphasis in agricultural policy needs to incorporate noncereal crops and noncrop agriculture for ensuring growth of an integrated and dynamic agriculture to supply necessary food stuff for a balanced diet of the population, generate exports and create the foundation of a modern economy (Mujeri, 2000).

Recently, the GOB (2002) has produced a document (popularly known as I-PRSP) on A National Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh. The document has emphasized that increasing growth and bringing a pro-poor orientation in the growth process would be achieved through emphasizing four priority areas: (i) accelerated growth in rural areas and development of agriculture and non-farm activities; (ii) small and medium manufacturing enterprises (iii) rural electrification, roads and supportive infrastructure; and (iv) information and communication technologies. The rural growth strategy would be driven by policies to intensify rice production and spur crop diversification and nonfarm production requiring more effective water management, improved rural infrastructure and institutions, strengthened research and development efforts, enhanced credit access, and expanded domestic/export marketing and distribution channels. To catalyze growth of non-farm activities and small enterprises, expansion of infrastructure facilities and supportive policies would be given priority. The rural growth policies would address environmental problems ranging from widespread resource depletion and ecological degradation, arsenic contamination of water, and vulnerability to natural disasters to ensure sustainability of the outcomes. The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) would be used as an expanding source of growth of the economy. In all these efforts, the private sector would play a key role.

Price Stabilization of Foodgrains

Stabilization of foodgrain prices is a major objective of food policy in Bangladesh.²³ Foodgrain prices are crucial for producers and consumers, specially the poor. Sharp increase in prices significantly lower real income of the poor households, 70 per cent of whose budget is spent on foodgrains. At the same time, instability in producer prices increase farmers' uncertainty and discourages private investment in agriculture. This classic conflict of interests perhaps is best addressed in the medium term through liberalization of trade and creating conditions for efficient production and marketing (The World Bank, 1999). The government resorts to Open Market Sales operation (OMS) i.e. sales of foodgrains, specially rice when prices exceed certain limit to contain upward fluctuations in prices. Recently, private sector trade has been playing an increasingly significant role in this respect. In fact, since Bangladesh liberalized private sector trade in the early 1990s, the import parity prices (ex-India) has effectively provided ceiling on domestic rice prices in Bangladesh. This certainly proved to be the case in the aftermath of the flood and associated crop damages in 1998, with private sector rice imports stabilizing market supplies and prices. Unfortunately, however, because of continued restriction of movement of rice from Bangladesh to India, there is no corresponding market mechanism to provide a price floor. An alternative could be domestic rice procurement programme.

Foodgrains, specially domestic rice procurement programme has a fairly long history in the region comprising Bangladesh, but price support is of more recent origin. For long time the, the primary objective of the procurement programme was to secure enough foodgrains to feed the Public Foodgrain Distribution System (PFDS). Since 1975, price support became an important objective, although feeding PFDS remained an important concern. While the programme has largely succeeded in augmenting public stock, specially in the boro season (more than 90% of procurement targets have been fulfilled), its contribution to provide price support has been minimal.²⁴ What is more important, the access of farmers to procurement centres specially

²³ The time series data on annual rice price fluctuations are provided in Annex Table IV.1. It is observed that by several measures (year-to-year fluctuations in nominal prices as well as random price fluctuations measured in terms of deviations from trend), annual rice prices displayed a greater degree of stability during the 1980s than in the 1970s but fluctuations in rice prices again increased in the 1990s (Dorosh and Shahabuddin, 2002).

²⁴ There is an asymmetry in trade-based mechanism of price stabilization in that while import parity serves as a ceiling price in times of large production shortfall, export parity does not provide an effective floor price of rice at present, in the absence of exports due to lack of market links, and international grading and processing facilities. Domestic procurement programme, therefore, has an important role to play in providing price support and production incentives to the farmers.

small farmers has been very limited. A recent survey shows that only 10 per cent of the sample farmers participated in the 1998 boro procurement programme, of which 5% were small, 13% were medium and 22% were large farmers. The collusion between traders and government officials at the procurement centres and lack of effective functioning of the local committee are among the major factors contributing to such a sorry state of affairs. Greater accountability and improved monitoring of the programme would go a long way in enhancing the efficiency of the programme, through minimizing irregularities and rent-seeking activities. The much-publicized wheat procurement scam recently has demonstrated how gross irregularities largely attributable to lack of accountability and appropriate monitoring at different tiers of the programme has cost the government dearly, apart from causing disincentive effects to wheat growers in the country.²⁵

Obligation to Fulfill (Provide)

Whenever an individual or group is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to enjoy the right to adequate food by the means at their disposal, States have the obligation to fulfill (provide) that right directly. This obligation also applies for persons who are victims of natural or other disasters.

As observed earlier, despite recent economic growth pervasive poverty and malnutrition are present in Bangladesh. According to latest estimates, about half of the population cannot afford an adequate diet. Although long-term trends in the overall incidence of poverty show modest signs of improvement, the standard of living for those in extreme poverty has stagnated, with one-quarter of the population maintaining a precarious existence. Chronically underfed and highly vulnerable, these people remain largely without assets (other than their own labour power) to cushion lean-season hunger or the crushing blows of illness, floods and other natural disasters. The need for targeted nets, therefore, remains strong.

In the long run, of course, poor families require increased employment and incomes to ensure adequate food intake. Consequently, any-term solution to malnutrition requires widespread, labour intensive pro-poor economic growth as discussed earlier. Such growth however, is a slow process for improving food security of vulnerable people.²⁶ As an interim solution targeted intervention programs may provide much needed income and thereby improve food consumption and nutrition. But the need overwhelms resources available. Recent estimates suggest that income transfers on the order of 2.6 billion per year would be required to raise the underfed population to minimum nutritional standards. Yet resource for targeted interventions stand at less than one-tenth of that amount and the aid-financed portion of those funds may shrink in the future. Therefore, for maximum impact, the government must carefully target its scarce resources to particular people, location and seasons (Ahmed, 2000).

Public Food Distribution System (PFDS) is an important element in the food economy of Bangladesh, designed to improve access to and consumption of foodgrains by various target groups. Given the large quantum of foodgrains moving through the PFDS, its effectiveness assumes special significance. The government has intervened in two major ways to relieve the nutritional stress of the poor: (i) through price subsidies on foodgrains and (ii) targeted income transfers. Through its general open market sales (OMS) operation, the government aims to arrest seasonal price hikes, thereby relieving consumer stress in the lean season. Through its targeted ration channels, the government offers rice and wheat for sale to selected groups at various rates of discount over market price. Income transfers, on the other hand, involve payment in cash or kind 'for work' or

²⁵ The government formed two enquiry committees to probe into the wheat procurement scam. It has been learnt from what has been leaked in the newspaper reports (the findings of the committees has not yet been made public) that as many as five ruling party lawmakers and ten government officials are involved in this scam. It is also learnt that while all of the officers have been made OSD (also three of them were removed from service subsequently), no action seemed to have been taken against the five ruling party lawmakers allegedly involved in the scam.

Apart from the corruption involved, the subsequent distribution of the low-quality insect-infected imported wheat (alleged to be unfit for human consumption) would certainly represent a gross violation from human rights perspective. This incident also highlights the importance of an integrated approach towards the realization of various rights how the right to information (the incidence has been extensively publicized in the newspapers and other media which has prompted to the government to probe into the scam) may have facilitated the simultaneous fulfillment of some other right i.e. the right to food. In fact, the Ministry of Relief has already requested the Ministry of Food not to release such wheat in their food relief distribution programmes.

²⁶ It is widely recognized that since land, capital and economic opportunities are fairly unequally distributed and underemployment is widespread, the trickle-down effect of economic growth on low-income groups is fairly weak in Bangladesh.

free through such programs as Food-for-Work (FFW), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Food-for-Education (FFE), Rural Maintenance Program (RMP) etc. Some of these programs allow the purchase of commodities (rice or wheat) at subsidized prices, some deliver commodities for free, others for work and still others deliver cash. All of these programs increase the real income of the recipient households. The cost of running the programs and the benefits received by the households to a large extent depend on the manner in which the income transfer is carried out.

With subsidies being gradually withdrawn and ultimately eliminated from all the monetized channels except essential priorities (EP)- the role of these channels (monetized) in the PFDS has declined substantially. The Modified Rationing Program (MR), which began in 1956, was discontinued in 1989 due to the well documented failure of the program to provide consistent supplies and partly because of large quantities estimated to have leaked out of the system. It was replaced by Palli (rural) Rationing (PR) program in 1989. Foodgrain distributed under the PR program were priced 25 per cent less than the Statutory Rationing (SR) price. In terms of total offtake, the PR program was largest among the monetized channels and the second largest among all PFDS distribution channels, accounting for about 20 per cent of total PFDS offtake in 1990/91. But this program was also found to be ineffective, operating with about 70 per cent leakage. In fact, it was shown that it costs the government Tk. 6.65 to transfer one Taka of income to an eligible beneficiary of the program. Moreover, despite the program's negligible impact on the rural poor, the government paid out subsidies of \$60 million per year. It was no wonder that the Palli Rationing program (PR) was abolished in 1991, only about two years after its introduction (Chowdhury and Del Ninno, 1998).

The composition of spending on food transfer programs has shifted from pure relief to development objectives. All food assisted programs in Bangladesh have been developed to assist the poor. However, while some aim primarily at relieving immediate disasters, others have explicit development objectives, such as rural infrastructure development, boosting primary school enrolment rates, and human capital development (Table IV.1) Although relief provision remains an important objective, most targeted food programs have gradually shifted in emphasis from relief to development.²⁷

Table III.1
Allocations to Food-Assistance Programs, 1999-2000

Program	Main Objective	Program Off-take in 1999-2000 (metric ton)
Food for Work (FFW)	Employment generation for the poor, mainly in the dry season; Development and maintenance of rural infrastructure	754,818
Food for Education (FFE)	Promote primary school enrollment and attendance, reduce dropouts and improve quality of education	285,973
Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)	Assistance to disadvantaged women in rural areas: training in market based income generating activities, functional education	316,675
Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)	Disaster relief: foodgrain distribution to needy families in periods of distress	149,138
Test Relief (TR)	Employment generation for the poor, mainly in the rainy season (similar to FFW except with lighter labour requirements)	124,508
Gratuitous Relief (GR)	Disaster relief: foodgrain distribution according to perceived need	20,324
Other	--	57,690
Total : 1999-2000	--	1609,126

Source : The World Bank (2002)

²⁷ The change in orientation of food transfer program from relief to development has been a gradual process since the early 1980s and is in line with one of the main recommendations of the 1988 Task Force of the government and aid donors on strengthening institutions for food-assisted development (SIFAD).

Crisis Management²⁸

The Government has demonstrated considerable success in disaster management. Despite frequent natural calamities, the government has successfully averted any major food crisis since 1974. The crisis management measures successfully adopted by the Government during the 1998 flood to avert widespread hunger will amply support this view.

During 1998, the country was devastated by unprecedented floods, the most severe, both in terms of depth and duration, in this century.²⁹ The massive flood left behind in its wake damage and destruction of output and assets encompassing all sectors, including rice production in the country. The Government responded to the crisis through supplying of food for immediate relief efforts during the flood, coordinating food aid commitments as well as deliveries and launching a post-flood agricultural rehabilitation programme. As part of the relief efforts, the Government increased post-flood foodgrains distribution and imported foodgrains through commercial channels. At the same time, private sector imports were encouraged which contributed significantly towards augmenting market supplies and stabilizing prices following floods.

It is important to note here that VGF cards are targeted to the poor through a number of committee beginning at the national level and reaching down to the local level. A study evaluating the allocations of VGF cards conducted by Grameen Trust and presented at the conference of Nagarik Durjog Mukabala Udyog on The Deluge: Developing Coping Capacities indicated that this targeting procedure was very effective. The study was conducted in 14 thanas of Kurigram, Gaibandha and Jamalpur districts. The survey of 950 households in these three districts found that "poor people almost always were the recipients of VGF cards, though specific sections from amongst the poor may have been favoured", and that "in general, there was a strong corruption-free climate in the distribution of VGF cards". Only 2.9 per cent of the households reported spending money to receive cards and the average amount of foodgrains received was 15.1 kilogram, only 0.9 kgs below the ration of 16 kgs per cardholder. The Government was thus able to cope with the crisis through effective targeting of foodgrains through the VGF and other channels of distribution.

It may be emphasized here that the Government policy was based on the realization and rightly so, that Government imports and food aid alone would not be sufficient to make up for the projected loss of the 2.2 million ton shortfall in aus and aman rice production before the wheat and boro rice harvests in April to June, 1999. Following the aman rice production shortfall in 1997/98, the Government encouraged private sector imports of rice through removal of tariff on imports and ensuring the free movement of these imports as official trade, through the land routes. As a result, with ample incentives for trade, the private sector imported over 1 million tons of rice from India through official channels in the first six months of 1998. Following this policy again after the flood, the private sector was encouraged to import more than 200,000 tons of rice per month from August 1998 to March 1999. Between July 1998 and March 1999, the private sector imported 2.20 million tons of rice thereby keeping prices in Bangladesh approximately equal to import parity levels.

III.2 NGO Programs and Activities

There is hardly any non-government organization (NGOs) in Bangladesh that work explicitly from a rights-based perspective on food issues. Most organizations, however, tend to approach food security through the prism of three essential elements- availability, accessibility and utilization, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. These elements of food security are included in the right to food. What a rights-based approach adds is setting specific responsibilities and holding the relevant parties accountable for the lack of action or any violation in relation to these responsibilities (Zeigler, 2002).

²⁸ This sub-section draws heavily on Shahabuddin (2000).

²⁹ The 1998 flood started on inundate the country from the beginning of early July and by mid-September engulfed about two-thirds area of the country. Since the depth and duration of the flood varied between different areas of the country, the loss of agricultural output and employment reflected this spatial variation in the severity of the flood in 1998.

BRAC, one of the non-government agencies in Bangladesh has demonstrated considerable initiative in improving security for the poor. In fact, BRAC's multi-dimensional programs are designed to reach poor including the most vulnerable section of the population. To ensure its program effectiveness, BRAC constantly reviews its programs and approaches with the poor, particularly the women, as they are its major partners in development activities. BRAC is an advocate of active participation of the poor in designing the programs to improve their socio-economic status. Major BRAC interventions include savings and credit programs, various employment and income generation activities, social development activities including training in legal education and human rights, essential health care, water and sanitation, non-formal primary education and provision of program support enterprises.

Today three million rural poor households are covered by BRAC's development programs. The major BRAC interventions directly linked to food production include development of poultry, livestock, fisheries, agriculture crops, and fruits and vegetables production programs. Organized savings, credit, skill development and marketing services promote self-employment in the above sectors enhancing greater availability and access to food. Provision of training in human rights and legal education, motivation and active participation in health, water and sanitation, and program on adult literacy and children's education have contributed to create a more favourable environment for enhancing access to food and improving nutrition.

A recent impact assessment study on BRAC's development program (Hussain, 1998) demonstrate that involvement of women in income generating activities had improved their ownership and control over assets and their status both in the household and at the community level. All these have reduced the discriminations against women in various socioeconomic aspects, and have positively contributed to their improved food security. BRAC program have also improved their coping capacity against crises, reduced seasonal fluctuations in food expenditure, enabled them to have higher amounts of food stocks in both peak and lean seasons of the year, and thus have made them less vulnerable in terms of food security. The study further showed positive improvement in the poverty status of the participants. Both incidence and intensity of poverty have been reduced. Average per capita calories consumption improved. BRAC members were found to consuming more nutritious food items such as vegetables, fish and meat than the comparison group (non-members.)

A lesson learned from the development programs of BRAC is their inadequacy to effectively satisfy the special needs of the bottom 10% of the rural poor in ensuring sustainable food security. The poorest have a very low asset-base with lack of alternative employment and/or income sources. It is difficult for this group to sustain its membership in any NGO. They lack the capacity to raise regular savings deposits and repay loans regularly. In many cases, they do not have male income earner. Thus, microcredit programs alone can not solve their problems. Experiences indicate that along with different development inputs, this very poor segment of the rural population needs subsidies, like food aid, until they can raise their asset base and become capable of coping with crisis. This would enable them to effectively participate in development programs to improve their food security.

It is in this context that IGVDG program-a BRAC initiative for the poorest--deserve special consideration. BRAC's Income Generation for the Vulnerable Group Development (IGVDG) program is specifically designed to transform a food aid program into a development program so as to sustain their economic activities and link this group with the mainstream development activities. It is a joint venture of the government and BRAC and is supported by the World Food Program (WFP) and Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF).

The primary selection of the Vulnerable Group Cardholder's³⁰ is done by the Chairperson and members of the local Union Parishad, and is finalized by the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation, Department of Livestock Services and BRAC. The poor destitute women, who are given VGD cards³¹ are eligible to participate in the program.

The main objective of IGVDG program is to include the most vulnerable poor women in the development activities on a sustainable basis and therefore, to improve their household food security. Major activities include small group formation, training on poultry raising and other income generation activities, provision of microcredit, and health and nutrition education. At the same time, non-formal primary education and basic health services are also offered. By the time the IGVDG cycle of 18 months ends, most of these women are able to initiate self-employment projects and continue to have a steady flow of income through involvement in BRAC's regular rural development programs. A study assessing the impact of the IGVDG program on nutritional status suggested that the program had significant positive effects on meal frequency, egg intake and the anthropometric status of the pre-school children. Moreover, sense of the well-being and self-confidence were higher among the program recipients than comparable non-recipients (Hyder 1998).

IV AN ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS

Apart from constitutional obligations, the adoption of Bangladesh of the international human rights instrument establishes the formal commitments of the State to the right to food. From rights-based perspective to development, an assessment of achievements would naturally concentrate on assessing the extent to which the food policy and programs in Bangladesh conforms or fails to conform to the rights-based approach as outlined in Section II. Hence the discussions in this Section is organized around three sub-sections, e.g. the process of policy formulation, the content of policies, and monitoring and accountability.

IV.1 Process of Policy Formulation : An Assessment

The right to adequate food, of necessity, will have to be realized progressively, given the resource constraints most developing countries including Bangladesh face. However, the States have a core obligation to take necessary action to mitigate and alleviate hunger as provided for in article 11 of the Covenant, even in times of natural or other disasters. It needs to be emphasized though that while only States are parties to the Covenant and this ultimately accountable for compliance with it, all members of society- individuals, families, local communities, non-government organization, civil society organization, as well as the private business sector- responsibilities in the realization of the right to adequate food. The State should provide an environment that facilitates implementation of these responsibilities. In other words, the process is as important as the outcome and the right to participate is an integral part of the right to development.

As observed earlier, the number of food-insecure people in Bangladesh is so vast compared to resources available for targeted programs that the progressive realization of rights assumes special significance. This in turn require some degree of priority-setting with respect to different projects and programs. The progressive realization of rights also calls for policies and programs with time-bound targets based on participatory mechanism for decision-making as well as monitoring. Also, one should distinguish here between short-term and long-term access to food. From human right perspective, such choices and exercises should be made with full participation and consultation of members from the civil society (including the stakeholders who are directly affected by such decisions.)

30 Vulnerable group has been defined as divorced, separated or abandoned women who do not have access to productive access and regular source of income.

31 VGD Card- Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) card is given to a women who receives a monthly ration of 31.25 kg wheat for a period of 18 months.

There has been hardly any participation of the civil society and stakeholders in the formulation of different policy documents prepared in the food sector over the last decade. For example, the SIFAD (Strengthening of Institutions of Food-Assisted Development) Task Force Report was prepared by GOB officials in consultation with the relevant donor agencies. The National Food Policies- the one approved in 1988 and the one recently drafted but awaiting GOB approval have also been prepared by the officials the Food Ministry, without any consultation from the members of the civil society.³² The Policy document approved by the GOB more recently- Report of the Task Force on "Comprehensive Food Security Policy for Bangladesh"- have only one representative from NGO out of nineteen Task Force Members. This is an important document in the sense that along with availability access (sufficient food entitlements for all households) and utilization (adequate nutrition for all individuals, particularly for women and children) have been emphasized to achieve comprehensive food security for all.

In the implementation of the various targeted programs, however, the NGOs are involved along with local level officials, which perhaps resulted in better targeting of these programs e.g. VGD and FFW, as we observed earlier. In the FFW program, Labour Contracting Society also plays an important role, to make the process more participatory, which is important from human rights perspective. However, the problems of leakages and cost-effectiveness of these and other targeted programs still remains a matter of concern. This calls for greater transparency and accountability in allocation and distribution of grain and cash in targeting the vulnerable groups and geographical areas. Thus, the participation of different stakeholders and civil society is necessary not only as an essential component of the human rights approach but also to ensure effective implementation of the targeted programs.

IV.2 The Content of Policies : An Assessment

The current approach of the government emphasizes availability, with insufficient attention to two other critical dimensions of a sound food security approach, namely access and utilization. Availability depends on supply; access on income; and utilization on living conditions. Food policy must strive to encompass all three dimensions and not just focus on availability. Such an approach will be consistent with broader, more comprehensive approach to food security. At the 1996 World Food Summit, the Government of Bangladesh set as its goal to reduce the number of undernourished people to half by the year 2015. Achieving this goal will require attention to all three aspects of food security in a coordinated effort involving several ministries, private sector, NGO and other concerned agencies.

Food security is generally interpreted in terms of intake of foodgrains (rice and wheat), neglecting other items of food needed for a balanced diet. It has been observed that while average intake of foodgrain consumption has reached satisfactory level due to considerable progress made in domestic foodgrain production, specially rice production in recent years, the production and average intake of several other food items are far below minimum nutritional requirements. For example, pulses accounted for only 39 calories per person per day, on average, during 1997, which was less than one fifth of the target of 231 calories, per person per day. Intake of fish and meat were about two-thirds of the target levels and intake of vegetable oil and fruits were approximately one-third and one-fourth of requirements. Vegetable consumption was less than one-seventh of the target level. It these represent the picture at the average level, one can easily imagine the dismal situation for those who are nutritionally more vulnerable.

There are high degrees of regional and seasonal variation in food consumption and nutritional status. Thus limiting interventions to specific distressed location of the country and concentrating program resources during the lean season will considerably improve the cost-effectiveness of such interventions. Currently, no existing programme has managed to target the acute lean season of September and October. Although year-round scheme such as VGD, RMP and FFE do deliver transfers during the period, no scheme has successfully targeted the season exclusively. Because of difficulties in earthmoving during these monsoon months, efforts will require experimentation with new models of delivery, and targeting. Given the acute stress of vulnerable groups, seasonal targeting during September-October remains a high but challenging priority for the future. Geographical targeting of interventions to disadvantaged areas need priority since areas with good agricultural performance also have lower incidence of poverty. There is also a bias against poorer areas in NGO interventions since it is difficult to ensure sustainability of microcredit program in areas of low agricultural productivity. Policy interventions are needed to eliminate the bias through targeted agricultural development and NGO intervention.

³² It is learnt, however, that the Parliamentary Committee has recommended the dissemination of the draft report to the members of the civil society for their comments and suggestions. This is a step in the right direction.

Of the 55 million food insecure people, only about five million are currently aid recipients. Given the big gap between total number of program beneficiaries and the number of food-insecure people and the prospects of continued decline in food aid, it becomes necessary to explore how a social safety net can be delivered more cost-effectively than the present system. To the extent the present delivery system can be made more efficient, more people could be covered with the same amount of aid. In fact, the government needs to reform the present food policy to alleviate poverty and hunger in the short term, reduce costs of food administration, and reduce disincentive effects of food aid. A reformed policy can accomplish these goals by increasing benefits and reducing costs of food program of the government.

The development benefits of some program- Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)- are substantial, but the benefits of other programs- Food-for-Education (FFE), Food for-Work (FFW)- are questionable. FFE increases school attendance among poor children but the quality of the education is low. FFE builds an extensive network of rural roads but their quality is also low. These programs meet their consumption support objectives but not development objectives. Their development orientation can be improved by linking food aid to quality of services and through establishing a strong local government system to administer these programs in a manner that ensure quality and responsiveness to the needs of the people.

There are reports of extensive leakage from the Public Food Distribution System (PFDS)- estimated at 30-35 per cent of program costs. For example, in the FFW, one of the major programs, it cost 2.6 Taka to deliver 1.0 Taka to the beneficiary. To realize greater benefits from targeted programs, it is necessary to ensure accountability and reduce leakage. Participation of local bodies (or representative of beneficiaries) at the stage of scheme selection and implementation should be strengthened. Moreover, if beneficiary communities share costs of public works programme, they are more likely to take active part, be more accountable and help reduce leakage in the system.

The latest National Food Policy is of 1988 vintage. Two attempts were made one in 1995 and another in 2001- to update the Policy Statements in the light of changed circumstances with respect of food production trends in poverty incidence, domestic as well as world food markets, but without any success till today. The Comprehensive Food Security Policy for Bangladesh has been approved by the Government in September, 2001. The composition of the Task Force which prepared the document, however, leaves much to be desired, with hardly any representation from stakeholders and other members from the civil society.

Agrarian reform do not occur simply because they are enacted into law. Such reforms are initiated and implemented generally when there are local constituencies advocating reforms and when those who govern have the will to invest in the future well-being of a whole people, rather than only a privileged few. Such reforms occur when those who govern also have the capacity to employ, when necessary, coercive means of any kind. The historical record of other reform initiatives suggests that the agrarian reform that Jannuzi and Peach (1990) proposed would not likely to be implemented within the existing political economy of Bangladesh. The political will of the government of Bangladesh to initiate such a far-reaching transformation of the agrarian structure of Bangladesh would need to be bolstered significantly before such a reform could be effectively implemented. However, government's recognition of the advisability of such a reform could be encouraged and supported, if external aid institutions would endorse the need for it and give impetus to it by means of supporting resources and investment in the process.

IV.3 Monitoring and Accountability Procedures: An Assessment

Lack of a systematic approach to monitoring the progress and holding the State accountable for failing to perform its duty is perhaps the major weakness in the right-based approach to food in Bangladesh. The government should develop and maintain mechanisms to monitor progress towards realization of the right to adequate food for all, to identify the factors and difficulties affecting the degree implementation of its obligation and to facilitate the adoption of corrective legislation and administrative measures, including measures to implement their obligations. Although Bangladesh has adopted 1996 World Food Summit Plan of Action, no comprehensive monitoring and accountability procedures has subsequently been developed to ensure that the targets set in the Plan of Action are fulfilled. At the national level, the parliament in general and the specific

parliamentary committee on food and agriculture in particular, can play an effective role in this respect. At the local level, although NGOs are playing an increasingly important role in monitoring the food distribution programs so that these are properly targeted, there is scope for strengthening its role in neutralizing the vested interests of the local elite groups and making the local committees more accountable, much in conformity with the rights based approach to development. Finally, wider dissemination of relevant information at all levels would assist the people and the civil society to assess how effective and accountable the Government is in promoting the right to food in Bangladesh.

V DIRECTIONS FOR ENHANCED IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RIGHT TO FOOD: LOOKING AHEAD

Although the government has adopted specific programs and policies to address chronic food security and also appropriate institutional mechanism have been put in place to deal with food crisis in times of natural disasters, these do not adopt an explicitly right-based approach.³³ As mentioned earlier, the government is required to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food. Moreover, the policies pursued should reflect the major characteristics of the right-based approach. In particular, the process of policy formulation, the contents of policies and the monitoring of policy implementation should be consistent with the requirements of the right-based approach. Also, the goals and targets set by policies should be in conformity with the targets to which the State has committed itself in the process of signing various human rights instruments.

As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh has ratified or acceded to a number of UN Treaties and Conventions which constitute important commitments of the country to the United Nations.

In 1990s, building on the themes of earlier international conferences and UN resolutions, quite a few major world conferences have been held. The Declarations and the Plans of Action unanimously adopted in such conferences should also be considered as equally binding on every participating nation including Bangladesh.

However, although human rights have gained increasing prominence in debates over food policies and programs, discussion of human rights in food policy documents is often inadequate. Furthermore, while signatories- and Bangladesh is no exception- acknowledge human rights, they ultimately downplay them in actual policies. This may have emanated at least partly, from the historical nature of the human rights debate, which has emphasized civil and political rights and minimized social, economic and cultural rights. The undervaluing of these "second generation" rights has affected debates about the balance between individual choice and the collective needs of society.

Given the large number of food-insecure people in the country (56 million in terms of absolute poverty and 25 million in terms of hard-core poverty) and the resource-constraints specially with declining level of food aid, the rights to food can only be realized progressively, which in turn calls for formulation of a time-bound plan of action and targets. The I-PRSP document (April, 2002) recently drafted by the government visualizes that the income-poverty would be reduced from 50 per cent in 2000 to 25 per cent in year 2015.³⁴ It is felt that although this is a laudable target and a reduction in income-poverty will definitely have positive impact on food security, a more definitive target(s) in terms of the progressive reduction in the absolute number of food-insecure people (e.g. estimated on the basis of direct calorie intake method) is called for. However, the document in its Tracking and Monitoring Matrix have developed some indications (in terms of program disbursement and number of beneficiaries) for monitoring the performance of various food-assisted programs (with as VGD, VGF, FFW, FFE, TR and GR) on an annual basis, both nationally (but disaggregated by rural and urban areas and by male and female categories) and for the "poor areas" identified through poverty mapping. This constitutes a step in the right direction from the right to food perspective. However, development of a monitoring mechanism is necessary but not sufficient to fulfill the requirements of right-based approach. This need to be vigorously pursued by the relevant Government agencies (as identified in the document) to achieve the desired objectives.

³⁴ The target has also been phased out over time: 46 per cent in 2003, 44 per cent in 2005, 35 per cent in 2010 and 25 per cent in 2015 (I-PRSP, April 2002).

³³ Needless to emphasize, the methodology of evaluating economic policies from the perspective of human rights is in a state of evolution. It is, however, clear that this methodology would have to be different from the standard methodology of policy evaluation in a number of important ways. For an elaborate discussion on this, see Osmani et al (March, 2002). Osmani (April, 2002).

As we observed earlier, food assisted targeted programs such as VGD, FFE and VGF are reasonably well-targeted with the poorest fifth of the population nearly five times as likely to participate as the richest fifth. However, most of the pro-poor targeting is due to targeting of the poor within communities rather than targeting of poor areas by the center. Exclusion errors are quite high, with a substantial share of eligible households currently not covered by any program. Priority reform areas to improve targeting outcomes include developing finer targeting criteria to reduce inclusion errors and increase coverage of eligible households currently excluded from the program. Considerable scope exists to improve geographic targeting to concentrate resource in poor areas. Finally, disaggregated poverty maps offer a potentially useful tool in this respect.

Even though visible transfer receipts are pro-poor, a large share of budgeted resources appears not to reach the intended beneficiaries, indicating serious problems of accountability.³⁵ Reforming program administration to stem leakage's offer a potential win-win option: not only would reducing leakage free-up additional resources needed to expand program coverage, but increases in spending permitted by these additional resources would be decidedly pro-poor. Thus reducing leakage from safety programs is an urgent policy imperative. Reform options include emulating the design features of other program with lower system losses (as GOB has done by announcing that the FFE will be replaced by a cash-stipend program to be administered like the female secondary school stipend program), piloting new initiatives such as smart cards or experimenting with alternative payments systems used in successful program like RMP as well as institutionalizing other monitoring tools (such as periodic survey-based assessments, public, expenditure tracking surveys, citizens report cards etc.) to improve accountability and minimize transaction costs.

We have observed earlier that over time, there has been a welcome improvement in targeting with some poorly targeted subsidized PFDS ration channels cut back, and others abolished outright. Moreover, food transfer programs have shifted objectives from pure relief to development, making one of the most important advances in the evolution of these programs. The change needs to be sustained to ensure that program resources make the greatest possible impact on the long-term welfare of intended beneficiaries. Experience with the 1998 floods suggests that programs such as the VGF and GR have important role to play in providing much needed assistance to disaster-affected families.

Given the Bangladesh's high propensity to natural disasters, it is important to retain some relief program in the menu of government safety net program that could potentially be scaled-up to contribute to short-term risk coping. However, the case for excessively large public foodgrain stocks to guard against shortages as well as to stabilize prices is weak. Enhancing the development impact of food-assisted targeted interventions requires providing complementary inputs and interventions. In addition, regular monitoring and evaluation is needed to ensure that targeted interventions achieve their desired objectives.

The forces that produce persistent and widespread hunger are local, national, and international. National governments- and Bangladesh is no exception-- bear the primary responsibility for creating an environment within which individuals and communities can effectively address hunger. But the steps needed to achieve food security cannot succeed if they are carried out in a top-down, technocratic manner. Governments should forge partnerships with NGOs and business and industry and ensure that local governments and communities have the resources and authority they need to facilitate food security and nutrition.

Other actors also have critical roles to play. The governments of developed countries should end trade-distorting policies; put resources behind their repeated pledges to provide more aid, but with better focus on contributing to sustainable food security and poverty reduction; and relieve the unpayable debt of poor countries.

³⁵ For example, leakage estimates based on data from the 2000 HIES indicate that as much as 75 per cent of total FFE transfers do not reach any beneficiary. Moreover, marginal incidence analysis of program transfer suggests that expanding them at the margin would be decidedly pro-poor; households in the bottom-fifth of the population would be roughly 4-5 times more likely to benefit from extra taka of spending than households in the richest fifth (The World Bank, 2002).

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Research paper on the food security of the Monga affected people
Looking into the Institutional Response to Monga



The Research Team

Abu Ala Mahmudul Hasan
Zahidul Islam
Sukrana Abdullah

Field Researcher

Md. Mojib-Ul-Hasan, Ahmed Toufiqur Rahman
Muhammad Ahsan Habib, Ranjan Saha Partha
Md. Mahmudur Rahman, Md. Mustak Ahmed
Mr. Shoaib Ahmed

Data Analysis

Eitu Khan

1. Introduction:

In this paper I will discuss the institutional responses to the Monga. Institutions here include Government, NGO, private sector and community level initiatives which are taken to assist people in facing the Monga, or to ameliorate the impact on them of the Monga. Therefore relief, food for work, cash for work, suspension of NGO loan instalments, writing off interest payments on micro credit loans, livelihood development programmes and asset transfers are included in institutional support. But micro credit, awareness programmes and other NGO programmes that are not directly linked with livelihood development are excluded from the category; as they have little impact on the food or livelihood security of the hard-core poor.

2. Methodology:

The research data was collected by first hand field work in Chilmari Upazila of Kurigram district. Field work was carried out from 26 January to 8 February, 2006. Most of the qualitative information was collected by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs); quantitative data was collected by household census. Information about the village infrastructure, resource, etc. was collected by using PRA (Participatory Rapid Appraisal) tools. We used secondary sources of information as well.

We have interviewed 31 Monga affected hard-core poor men and women; 15 local government and NGO officials (including some others outside Chilmari) and UP Chairmen and Members. 4 FGD sessions- 1 with the male and 1 with the female in each village- were conducted. 2 PRA sessions were also held in two villages. The census covered 241 households in the villages.

3. Description of the Field:

I worked with a team in two villages in Chilmari Upazila. The villages are Nalitakata in Astomirchar Union and Nayabash in Ranigong union. A cluster of houses from Majartari village, which is adjacent to Nayabash, is also included in the Nayabash area.

According to the BBS census Chilmari Upazila covers 224.97 Square Kilometre land area within that 37.53 Sq.Km is riverine. Total population is 114,350.

Nalitakhata is an island char it has 315 acres land area and 87 households. Total population is 391; among them 180 male and 211 female; literacy rate is 35.25%^a. Most of the people here lost their land and home in river erosion. They have settled for 4/5 years here on lands belonging to others. The landowners are well off and so do not live in the char themselves. They live in different towns. Occasionally they take some rent (300-1000 Tk. per year) irregularly; sometimes let landless stay free of cost.

Nayabash is situated in the main land on an old flood prevention embankment, most of which has been eroded by the river. A new embankment has been built deeper inland from the river leaving Nayabash vulnerable to both flood and erosion. Nayabash has total population of 410 including 195 male and 215 female. There are 95 households and literacy rate is 23.20%. The BBS census report did not mention any area. Majartari has a population of 1773 and literacy rate is 19.50%.^b

Most of the people living in the study areas are hard-core poor and few have their own land. Majority of the people lost their land in river erosion. The males are mostly agricultural day labourers who migrate to work outside the district. Some comparatively older men do not migrate, but instead find their work in the vicinity. Most of the women are housewives. Some of them work as agricultural and domestic workers and a few participate in earthwork and carrying sand in the 'Ghats'. Some women sew kantha (Quilts) or raise some poultry and livestock too.

^a Population Census 2001, BBS

^b *ibid*

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2. Methodology:

The research data was collected by first hand field work in Chilmari Upazila of Kurigram district. Field work was carried out from 26 January to 8 February, 2006. Most of the qualitative information was collected by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs); quantitative data was collected by household census. Information about the village infrastructure, resource, etc. was collected by using PRA (Participatory Rapid Appraisal) tools. We used secondary sources of information as well.

We have interviewed 31 Monga affected hard-core poor men and women; 15 local government and NGO officials (including some others outside Chilmari) and UP Chairmen and Members. 4 FGD sessions- 1 with the male and 1 with the female in each village- were conducted. 2 PRA sessions were also held in two villages. The census covered 241 households in the villages.

3. Description of the Field:

I worked with a team in two villages in Chilmari Upazila. The villages are Nalitakata in Astomirchar Union and Nayabash in Ranigong union. A cluster of houses from Majartari village, which is adjacent to Nayabash, is also included in the Nayabash area.

According to the BBS census Chilmari Upazila covers 224.97 Square Kilometre land area within that 37.53 Sq.Km is riverine. Total population is 114,350.

Nalitakhata is an island char it has 315 acres land area and 87 households. Total population is 391; among them 180 male and 211 female; literacy rate is 35.25%^a. Most of the people here lost their land and home in river erosion. They have settled for 4/5 years here on lands belonging to others. The landowners are well off and so do not live in the char themselves. They live in different towns. Occasionally they take some rent (300-1000 Tk. per year) irregularly; sometimes let landless stay free of cost.

Nayabash is situated in the main land on an old flood prevention embankment, most of which has been eroded by the river. A new embankment has been built deeper inland from the river leaving Nayabash vulnerable to both flood and erosion. Nayabash has total population of 410 including 195 male and 215 female. There are 95 households and literacy rate is 23.20%. The BBS census report did not mention any area. Majartari has a population of 1773 and literacy rate is 19.50%.^b

Most of the people living in the study areas are hard-core poor and few have their own land. Majority of the people lost their land in river erosion. The males are mostly agricultural day labourers who migrate to work outside the district. Some comparatively older men do not migrate, but instead find their work in the vicinity. Most of the women are housewives. Some of them work as agricultural and domestic workers and a few participate in earthwork and carrying sand in the 'Ghats'. Some women sew kantha (Quilts) or raise some poultry and livestock too.

^a Population Census 2001, BBS

^b *ibid*

Migrant labourers go out in small groups for seeking work in various districts. Though most of them mainly work in agricultural fields sometimes they have to work as low skilled day labourers in earthwork, carrying construction materials etc. Few of them pull rickshaws or vans. Usually, those who live in the main land pull rickshaws. People living in chars like Nalitakhata do not like rickshaw pulling because they are neither used to nor comfortable with the work.

4. Defining Monga:

'Monga' indicates a near famine situation in the northern districts of Bangladesh. But people living in the very places reported for suffering from 'Monga' sometimes ask 'What is 'Monga'? or identify 'Monga' as earthworks (for road construction and other purposes)! This reflects the use of different terms for this phenomenon in different regions. 'Monga' is a term originated from North Bengal- the greater Rangpur- Dinajpur districts that indicate the seasonal hunger and shortage of food of the poor people in this area in the months of Ashin-Kartik in Bengali solar calendar (late September to early November in the Gregorian calendar). On the other hand, many people living in the Brahmaputra river basin, who share the same fate as the northerners, have are more closely linked linguistically to the inhabitants of greater Mymensingh districts. They term the lean period as 'Aahal' or 'Aakal'. Another understanding among many people in the Brahmaputra basin of the term 'Monga' is nothing more than earthworks, a view generated by the association of the term with the DFID funded pilot project MMIPP (Monga Mitigation Initiative Pilot Project) which is commonly known as the 'Monga Project' that provides wages for earthworks.

In fact the term 'Monga' means lean period. Severe scarcity, starvation; market price hike, shortage of food and other commodities of daily utility; dearth of employment, want of money in hand, all these are implied by the term 'Monga'. Some people said 'Monga' stands for disruption of crop production, flood, drought, epidemic of poultry and river erosion. One person commented that 'Monga' indicates the period when '--we can not even afford leaves and vegetation--'; another echoed - '--when we have no belongings other than our bare hands--'. Basically, 'Monga' is the incapability of the poor people to buy (or collect in other ways) food and other essential commodities due to lack of money in hand. It occurs simply because poor people of the region do not have any work to earn money for buying food for some periods of the year. So, 'Monga' can break out even after a bumper yield of crops and it is happening year after years.

5. When it Happen:

Generally it is known to occur in the months of Ashin-Kartik (late September to early November). But according to the information provided by the local people our study team found a much pervasive existence of 'Monga' throughout a longer period. We found that Monga visits the area thrice a year; in the months of Ashar - Srabon (late June to early August) in rainy season when flood submerge the area; in the month of Choitro (March-April) and finally in Ashin-Kartik. But these spans of time are not rigid; Monga can break out earlier and later depending on the circumstances. Some informants said that the delayed flood destroyed the Aman crops this year; they could not even replant the fields for seed and cash shortage. The price of the seeds was very high and they did not get any government or any other support for this purpose. So, they are expecting the Monga due in Choitro (March-April) to occur earlier this year, possibly in 'Falgun'. Flood, drought, torrential rainfall and above all, change in the crop calendar can shift the timing of the 'Monga' period back and forth. But for some people Monga is a life long experience. They quite literally said '- we endure Monga round the year --- ----'.

6. Reasons:

People here are used to doing agricultural work. They can do little out side peasantry. When they go out for work to other areas, they also do agricultural work there. If they fail to find agricultural work, they tend to do low skilled works like earthwork, carrying sand and construction materials, etc. Some people, generally from the mainland, work as rickshaw pullers; but the people from the chars are uncomfortable with rickshaw pulling, because they are not accustomed to it. So, Most of the people have to engage in agricultural labour.

In the months of Ashin-Kartik, agricultural work is not available anywhere, as at that time the Aman paddy is already planted and except for weeding, there is no work needed before harvesting in Agrahyan. This causes unemployment and scarcity. Some people said that they do not get any work if the farmers have no work. One said- 'when foxes call in home, foxes call everywhere' ('Deshe hial dakle bidesheo hial dake') - means when death visits, it visits everywhere, at home or in abroad. The similar patterns are repeated in the months of Chaitra-Boishakh.

In the rainy season the working men stay at home, because the flood water surge and submerge the homesteads so they have to shift their houses for the period. At that time, river also erodes the banks and chars forcing people to relocate their settlements. There are also the security concerns. Therefore, in the rainy season leaving the women and children alone at home that men can not go abroad for work (One study indicates that the insecurity for women are as high as 12.9%^c). People live on their savings (of cash or grain) or on credit or relief during this period. It seriously hinders their effort to save money and improve the living standard. Usually, they have to resettle in every five or six years in the island chars.

In the Chilmari region most of the people have no land of their own. They do not have the cattle or ploughs, and so can not get land for 'Adhi' (share cropping). Even when they can manage to get land for share cropping they have to give half of the yield to the land owner. The amount remaining with them after giving the land owners share is not enough for their consumption.

They can not even raise cattle and poultry because they have no land of their own and others do not allow them to graze and forage in their lands, and due to shortage of space for keeping them at night and in the rainy season. Many are compelled to sell their existing livestock during the Monga for consumption.

Though some of the people have their own land, it is either eroded in the river or silted up of sand during flooding, making it uncultivable. Share croppers also suffer this misfortune- the land gives good yield this year turn into desert in the next. This is a great problem especially for island chars. As a consequence, inhabitants of these areas can not undertake intensive farming, and opportunities of agricultural labour are very limited in the vicinity.

The UP Chairman of Ranigong said that a major problem is the absence of infrastructure which prevents people from selling their products.

7. Institutional Support:

7.1 Government Support:

In Bangladesh the Government provides the largest institutional support for food security of the poor people including those affected by Monga (though the local Relief office staff in Chilmari, said that they have no programme to mitigate Monga). For example, the Government provide VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) service for the rustic poor that address Monga in the North Bengal. In Chilmari the relief office cover all six unions under the programme and issue VGF cards to 2000 people from each union. The beneficiaries get 10 kg of rice each month. In 2005 this office has distributed rice four times; giving 10kg rice per cardholder each time. This year, 2006 the service is due to be extended to 3000 people in each union.

The office also distributed 30 kg rice per family once during the months of Aashin to Agrahayan (three months) under EMOP programme. That programme was funded by the World Bank. The UP (Union Parishad) Chairman prepared the list of the eligible receivers that was later scrutinized by the army and the grains were also disbursed by them.

Besides, the Government Food Department twice sold rice at a rate of Taka 4 per kg rate to 900 people in each union. Each person was entitled to buy 6 kg at this subsidised rate.

The relief office also informed us that they have distributed 8466 cards for FSVGD (Food Security for Vulnerable Group Development/ WFP VGD Programme) in Chilmari Upazila in 2005. Our study areas- both Ranigong and Astomoir Char unions have received 1561 and 1411 WFP VGD cards respectively. The WFP programme distributed 30kg rice per card once during the year. Selections of those VGD card holders were primarily done by the UP and the food grains were distributed by the Army under the supervision of the Upazila relief office.

^c Hossain Zillur Rahman, Monga forecast 2005

The Upazila Social Welfare office stated that they have introduced micro credit scheme in the 'Monga' affected areas, which has been running since 1985 in Chilmari Upazila. The scheme gives a maximum loan of Tk. 5000 to a person for a period of up to 11 months against repayment of a 10 percent service charge from the receiver. A committee consisting of UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) and UP Chairmen authorises the credit disbursement.

The Upazila Social Welfare office also distributes Elderly Allowance for the needy elderly people of the Upazila. A total of 1626 persons now get this benefit; among them 270 and 229 persons respectively are from Ranigong and Aostomi Char union. Another 181 persons are under consideration for new allotment of this allowance from the whole Upazila.

We learned from BRDB (Bangladesh Rural Development Board) that they have diverse programmes like women development, Podatik, SPDP and Polli Progoti. Polli Progoti programme runs only in Ranigong union. BRDB has suspended its programme in Ashtamir Char union due to Monga and river erosion. They have also applied for writing off the liability of the loans. They said that a plan for implementing labourer's loan scheme jointly with the RKUB (Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank) for the Monga period was postponed.

The Upazila women affairs office informed us that they have VGD and widow allowance programme in all six unions of the Upazila. VGD is a contractual programme that tries to make the poor self dependent. In Chilmari Upazila 1964 persons are benefited from the programme. Under widow allowance 185/ Tk are paid every month. 288 persons in Ranigong union and 136 persons in Ashtamir Char union are awarded with this allowance.

7.2 UP Office:

UP representatives stated that the support provided by the government through VGF and VGD scheme is inadequate. In 2006, they have received 3000 VGF cards although there are admittedly 4500 hardcore poor in the union. They distribute 10kg rice every month for 3 months each year under VGF programme. There are only 288 VGD cards, which provide 15kg Ata and Taka 150 to each person every month for two years, allotted for the union. The

UP representatives had prepared a primary list of the prospective VGF card receivers and submitted to the Upazila level; it was later scrutinized by the Army before nominating the card holders.

The UP representatives also provide elderly and widow allowances. Total 300 people in the union receive these benefits. They are primarily selected by a committee comprising the ward member and the Gram Sarker and the list is sent out to the UNO by the UP Chairman.

Additionally, in Ranigong union 20-30 poor Freedom Fighters get honorarium of 500 Tk. per month.

The UP officials said that they had received complaints regarding not putting some names in the list; in their view, this was expected, given that the allotment of VGF cards was less than the number of really needy people. But they had not come across any alleged irregularities.

7.3 NGO Support:

7.3.1 RDRS

a. RDRS Monga Project (MMIPP): RDRS officials said that the "Monga" project was a pilot project for four months to mitigate the dire affects of Monga on the poorest people in the five Northern districts. This World Bank (WB) funded project started from 10 October 2005- 10 January 2006 in one Upazila in each of the districts of Kuriogram, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur, Gaibandha and Nilphamari. The Upazilas were selected in a workshop in Rangpur participated by the WB representatives and officials of NGOs working in the area; they also selected the NGOs for working in the respective districts. RDRS was selected for working in the Chilmari Upazila of Kurigram districts. The Upazila was selected in consultation with the DC and UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer). RDRS consulted with the UNO, UP Chairmen to select three unions and five villages from each union in the Chilmari Upazila. RDRS staffs selected 100 beneficiaries from each of the 15 villages in the Upazila through PRA (Participatory Rapid Appraisal) methods and worked with them.

There were four components of the Project-

1. Skill Development training: RDRS provided training on integrated homestead farming for five days to the beneficiaries and compensated them with 90/- per day for the income loss incurred through attendance at the programme. The days of training were adjusted to enable the participants to attend at their convenience.

2. Asset Transfer: Among those 1500 participants, 1200 were granted with Taka 2500/ as seed capital for income generating activities. Almost 90% of them chose to buy calves or goats with the money while some others bought poultry and seed for cultivation.

3. CIW (Cash for Work): Tk. 3,00,000 / was allocated for each villages for CIW. Each person received 60 Tk. for a day under CIW rural community infrastructure development works (earthworks), road repair and construction, elevation of community places such as graveyards, schools, homestead levels, flood repair. The needs were identified by the

community in a participatory process. An RDRS staff said that they have paid 51Tk. per day to each person for the work.

4. Ensuring credit worthiness: Another activity of the project is improving their economic condition through training and distributing seed capital; so that affected individuals can be eligible to receive micro credit.

The main aim of the project was to provide work for the men and women of the region in the Monga period and reduce its affect.

RDRS officials stated that they were currently involved in evaluating the impact of the process and could not confirm its effectiveness in 'Monga' mitigation but their observations indicated that it was useful for the 'Monga' affected people in many ways.

b. Chars Livelihood Project (CLP) of RDRS: This is a DFID funded project for improving the livelihood situation of the inhabitants of island chars (Chars that are not attached to the main land and separated by the river). The programme started in 2005 and expected to run till 2009 in Chilmari. People who are not included in any other NGO programmes (including those of RDRS) are targeted for assistance under this programme. The government of Bangladesh has contributed 2% of the fund of CLP.

The programme has three components-

1. Infrastructure development and Good Governance: Under this component, earthwork is carried out to develop and repair rural infrastructure. The hardcore poor of the area are, regardless to their affiliation with NGO programmes, provided with work under this project. They are paid a daily rate of Taka 80. (To date this programme was run by another organization named Maxwell Stamp; it is expected to be done by RDRS in future-February 2006)

2. Livelihoods: This part is designed to improve livelihood of the programme members, by providing them with training and grants of Taka 18400 which included asset transfer in the form of cattle, goats, poultry or capital for micro enterprise, and a remaining Taka 5400 to be paid as monthly stipend of Taka 300. The asset transfer has not started yet.

3. Social Mobilisation and Voice Raising: This component is designed to build awareness among the participants of their rights and responsibilities to enable them to demand their rights, learn good practice and exercise these for improvement of their lives.

The programme has aimed to work for improving the livelihood situation of the people otherwise excluded from the NGO programmes. Till early February 2006, 2309 people have been incorporated in the programme.

c. The Country Programme: This is an Integrated Food Security (IFS) programme funded by WFP that provides earth work for the poor at a rate of Taka 20/ and 2 kg of wheat or equivalent amount of money daily. It is also implemented by RDRS and expected to continue till May 2006 in Chilmari and then it will be shifted to another Upazila.

d. Other RDRS Responses to Monga: RDRS officials said that they remain flexible about

credit realisation during the Monga and carry out relief operations during this period. In the flood of 2004 they stopped the instalment of loans for two months but in 2005 they could not do so.

7.3.2 BRAC:

a. Monga Project: From May 2005, BRAC has initiated its three year long 'Monga' project, which provides a loan of Taka 700/ to each household for seven months. The credit receivers have to pay the sum back in seven instalments with an additional Taka 5/ service charge. Infact, they have to return Tk. 735/ altogether after seven months for having received Taka 700. The programme covers 1264 households in three unions of Chilmari Upazila namely Ranigong, Thanahat and Ramna. Three other unions will be brought under the programme soon. In Ranigong union 211 households have come into the programme. It expected to be amalgamated with the STUP (Specially targeted ultra poor) programme soon.

Specially Targeted Ultra Poor (STUP) Programme: BRAC has also a three year Specially Targeted Ultra Poor (STUP) programme for the ultra-poor in the Chilmari Upazila. Under this programme two cow and four goats are given to each ultra poor households; and they are given Taka 70/ per week for 6 months to buy cattle fodder.

7.3.3 Grameen Bank:

Grameen Bank has no 'Monga' specific programme but during the flood of 2004 they suspended collection of loan instalments for 6 weeks.

7.3.4 ASA:

ASA has an interest-less credit programme in three unions of Chilmari Upazila which provides for loans of Taka 500/ for six months during floods and for three months during the Monga. They also distributed medicine during the flood period.

Their main programme is credit with interest. They give 2000/-5000/ Tk. loan for one year (46 weeks)

7.3.5 GUK (Gram Unnoyan Kendra):

GUK implemented an earthwork programme among 600 people in four unions of Chilmari Upazila for a month during 2005 Monga. The project was funded by NETS, Germany. They gave 25 Tk. per day per person for the work.

7.3.6 Apon Uddug:

Apon Uddog distributed relief among 250 'Monga' affected households in Ashtamir Char union in 2004, providing with food stuff and medicine for 10-15 days and distributing

commodities like tube well, sanitary latrine, vegetables seeds among the flood affected people on a limited scale. The activities were funded by Action Aid.

7.4 UP Response to NGO Activities:

UP representatives said that in Ranigong union RDRS has implemented a project on 'Monga' known as MMIPP. They have initiated earthwork for providing work to 500 unemployed poor men and women at the rate of Taka 60/ per day for three months (October - December, 2005). RDRS has received Taka 9/ from each worker and paid them Them 51/. They have also granted Taka 2500/ each to the 400 (80%) of these 500 people for livestock and poultry rearing. The village within which this project was carried out was selected by the UP and the beneficiaries were selected by RDRS through consultation with the villagers in a participatory way.

Other than RDRS, GUK has worked with 100 people providing Taka 60 per day for earthwork, over three months; they also selected the beneficiaries themselves.

The UP had received allegations that some NGO officials had taken kickbacks for employing people to undertake earthworks but they had not found any evidence backing up such allegations. They commented that even UP and NGO officials who had no involvement with the project were sometimes accused of bribery and corruption, usually by those people who were unable to obtain work.

They were aware of the Grameen Bank, ASA and BRAC credit programmes. They commented that BRAC distributed calves among their members, but that no other NGO had written off or reduced the rate of interest repayment on their loans during Monga. They also noted that though some NGOs had suspended the realisation of instalment of loans for 2/3 weeks for the flood period; they later contributed with the realisation and recovery process.

8. People's Response on Support:

Some of the interviewees alleged that they had not received any relief or allowance (Table-1). A few of them alleged that they obtained no assistance despite persistent efforts. One person said that the Chairman, members had advised him to earn his wages by working, rather than looking for the aid. Villagers complained that the UP Chairman, members do not give the relief properly; instead they receive money from the aid receivers. They do not receive the money themselves but their agents, who are known to all, collect it on their behalf. Some villagers also claimed that they had to pay Taka 500-1000 per person to the Chairman's agent even for enlisting in the RDRS earthwork programme. In one incident, the agent returned the money after failing to enlist two of the persons in Nayabash. Some others also alleged that money was demanded from the aid receivers. Usually, some poor people can get relief without much effort but some others face demands for payment of bribes just to get cards, relief and allowances to which they are entitled. Some people do not get relief even after paying money.

1. Have anyone get any assistance in this household?

Value level	Count	%
1. VGF	69	28.6
2. VGD	20	8.3
3. Elderly allowance	3	1.2
4. Widow allowance	1	.4
5. Indigent Mothers' card	1	.4
9. No	147	61.0
N	241	100.0

Source: BLAST household census, Chilmari, 2006

People, who received relief or aid under the VGF card scheme, informed us that they often obtain less grain than the amount allocated. Many people said that they got 7-8 kg of rice instead of the stipulated 10 kg. Others noted inconsistencies in the provision of such assistance; with some people obtaining help thrice a year, some twice and some others only once. Some said they are getting aid for last 2 years, some for one year.

One said 10 kg of rice was distributed once in the last year by the army without corruption and 17 persons in Nayabash got the help. Another in Nalitakhata said rice was given three times by army, each time 10 kg for a person.

Two persons in Nalitakhata said that in the last flood they received 16 kg rice in two instalments, though they were entitled 10 kg each time but another two persons there got full 10 kg rice.

Some others including a Gram Sarkar member in Nayabash stated that under VGF programme, a monthly handout of 10 kg of rice was distributed for three months. The Gram Sarker member also informed us that under the VGD scheme, 15 kg Ata (flour) and Taka 150 per month were distributed for 12-13 months and will be continued for 22 months. Total five persons in the village had got the card, while four persons were receiving the elderly allowance. Most of the people claimed that each of the recipient had to pay Taka 1000 bribe to receive the allowance.

There were allegations by local people that relief and assistance under VGF programme were being misappropriated by the UP members, Chairman and others involved in beneficiary selection and distribution process. One response often heard was that the chairmen have to bear some expenses and food stuffs are also be eaten by the pests, so that they are unable to give the full allocation as it does not exist. One informant said that 'the Chairman does not

appropriate relief. But members are poor; they sometimes embezzle food grains for consumption but do not sale it for profit.'

In the selection of aid receivers, it was further alleged that nepotism plays an important role. The relatives and allies of the chairman are often privileged enough to get VGD, VGF cards and other allowances.

Political affiliation is also important for getting relief. The partisans of the chairman and members of the ruling party are prioritized for relief and the allocation of VGF-VGD cards. Thus, those who are eligible and needy do not get help while those who are in a relatively better condition and can pay money or play important role in local election politics are able to access such assistance.

Area based discrimination is also evident in card and relief distribution. Some alleged that Chairman prefers to select for distribution the areas of his support to keep his vote banks intact. For example, the Nayaboash and Majartari villages are in the border of Chilmari thana, so these two obtain less importance and relief does not reach so far because of their distance and bad roads. Many villagers said that 'The Chairman does not care about the village; he does not come here; even do not care to inquire about the situation here. When the government officials come in the village, only then he accompanies them'. In Nayabash one person told that the member does not live in this village, his residence is in another village, and as a result he does not bring relief to the former.

Another old man said that young people get cards more easily as they have closer relations with Chairman, members, while some others do not get assistance because they are too old to go to the chairman for seeking help.

Why poor people do not get relief and cards- yet suffer silently year after year- could be understood from the following comment as stated by a Nayabash resident-

'People are ignorant, they do not know how much goods come and how much are distributed; they have to believe what the chairman says; when they hear that relief has come, they go to the chairman and request for enlisting their names. Chairmen reply that the commodities have already run out. He will try for them next time. They (people) can not check the fact, can not even pursue'.

Other sorts of problems are also evident. For example, in Majartari that elected UP member is a woman (Basiron Bibi); but she is not active; rather, practically, her husband carries out the activities of the Member. He had some problem of being a candidate, so, he let his wife contest in the election and she won; afterward the husband took over. He is not keen at all to help the villagers.

We also found some people who had not faced any problem getting help and who had not faced any financial demands for distribution of VGF, VGD cards. While few others had no opinion on the matter.

Some people (28.2%) informed us that NGOs only help their beneficiaries (Table- 2); others, even in worse conditions, do not get their assistance.

(Table- 2) Which difficulties did you face to receive aid?

Value level	Nayabash		Nalitakhata		Majartari		All	
	C	%	C	%	C	%	C	%
01. Not being member of NGO	17	39.5	14	31.1	2	6.9	33	28.2
02. Do not give due amount	4	9.3	4	8.9	2	6.9	10	8.5
03. Demand bribe for card	14	32.6	1	2.2	21	72.4	36	30.8
04. Have to pursued much for aid	5	11.6	1	2.2	2	6.9	8	6.8
05. Better offs get instead of poor	2	4.7			1	3.4	3	2.6
06. Do not send relief here due to bad road	4	9.3	2	4.4			6	5.1
07. Chairmen, members appropriate	3	7.0	1	2.2			4	3.4
09. Advise to earn working			1	2.2			1	0.9
10. Expensive			2	4.4			2	1.7
11. CLP/ RDRS membership			23	51.1			23	19.7
12. Ashamed to receive relief			1	2.2	1	3.4	2	1.7
Do not know		1	2.3				1	0.9
N	43	116.3	45.0	111.1	29	100.0	117	10.3

Source: BLAST household census, Chilmari, 2006

9. Community Support:

We found some people had no regular income source or were unable to work; but they nevertheless surviving in that harsh situation resulting from Monga. Loans are not available; employment is not certain, most of the people are very poor, yet very few people die from hunger or leave the place forever. The reason is community support. Even though most of them are very needy they do not let others starve to death. When some one is at risk of starving to death, neighbours share their very scarce food with them, keep them alive. This empathy binds them together as a community and helps the weaker to live on.

10. Conclusion:

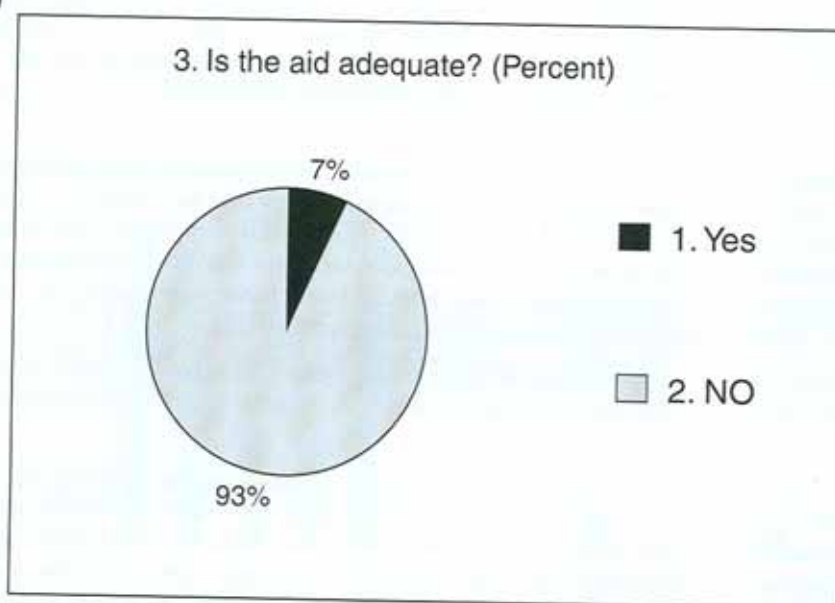
The study in Chilmari resulted in the following findings:

Insufficient VGF cards: In Ashtamir char and Ranigong unions, until 2005, 2000 VGF cards were allocated for

14429 persons of 2977 households and 18764 people of 4702^d households respectively. From 2006 the numbers are to be increased to 3000 cards for each union. While in Ashtamir Char it is expected that all the poor people may get VGF cards this year, there are still insufficient numbers available for Ranigong. This indicates that allocations of the goods are not calculated on the basis of the local need, severity of the problem and other circumstances. Rather, they are highhandedly allotted by the government high officials.

Limited impact of VGF scheme: Even if the VGF scheme is implemented properly, it does not itself ensure the food security for the poor. The amount of food provided by the VGF programme is so meagre (10 kg per month) that it is not sufficient for a nuclear family of five (average rural household size in Kurigram district is 4.49^e) for a week and they themselves can not afford anything else. 93% of the respondents said that the aid received of available is inadequate (Table-3). So, those who receive VGF cards are left in a precarious situation that force them to live in hunger; because they are unable to access any other institutional food support, while VGF grant is clearly not enough. The VGF scheme does not include the people who are supported by any other government or non-government food distribution programmes^f; at the same time other programmes do not provide sufficient amount of food aid. Even if these people are able to secure VGF card one year, it does not ensure their food security for the long term as there is no certainty that they will get the card in the next year.

(Table-3)



Source: BLAST household census, Chilmari, 2006

Discriminatory Aid Distribution: Unequal distribution of aid constitutes a major problem, with some needy individuals receiving nothing. The amount of aid varies according to the time and place of distribution. Such unequal distribution appears to be triggered by nepotism, infrastructure problems political and area biases.

One of the Upazila relief office staff informed us that they distributed 10 kg of rice for 4 times in 2005 under the VGF scheme; but no one including the UP chairman said that the rice of VGF programme was distributed more than 3 times. So, it appears to be a chaotic operation that even the officials are not sure about it.

^d Population Census 2001, BBS.

^e Population Census 2001, BBS.

^f 51% respondent in Nalitakhata (19.7% of all) said they do not get relief/ VGF cards because they are included in CLP/ RDRS programmes. (Table-2)

Faulty design of aid programme: It is a common allegation among local people that the UP chairmen and members do not distribute the goods properly, and that they distribute limited amounts and misappropriate the rest. However, in practice many flaws in the programme render them impossible to run properly. One project implementation officer (not the officer based in Chilmari) commented that when the chairmen draw the rice from the silo, the labour chiefs (overseers) do not give them full quantity, tempering the weighing. Further, the silos deliberately give only degraded, rotten rice to the chairmen. The chairmen can not protest because these labour chiefs are very powerful locally. The Chairmen receive the commodity in 100 kg bags but when they distribute it, they give 10 kg to each person. As they are not provided with the extra amount for handling loss, some quantity of the goods is wasted during distribution. Moreover, the government pays for transport cost for truck fare but the chairmen have to carry the goods by other more expensive means; even if they carry the material by truck, the cost provided by the government is not sufficient, and the chairmen are forced to transport the grains at their own cost and may end up selling some of the goods to cover such costs. The programme organization appears to be carelessly designed and implemented.

Other research studies also indicate that government food support schemes (eg food for work) are not well planned, organized and staffed, leading to mismanagement and misuse of aid. ^g

Such organizational flaws and difficulties are exacerbated by the corruption of officials involved with the programme; specially, the irregularities of the UP chairmen and members (Table - 4). These, altogether, deprives the poor from their share in insufficient state aid. Even NGO initiatives for helping the poor are allegedly hampered by the unscrupulous UP representatives, if they are involved in the process (eg perception of the RDRS Monga project).

Insufficient impact: Sometimes people do not get the full benefit of NGO projects. In the RDRS 'Monga' project, for example, levying Taka 9 service charges from each labourer per day they have deprived the Monga affected people of Chilmari Upazila of a total of Taka 4,50,000 (9 Tk. from 50,000 men per day- total amount allocated). Although, the processes run by NGOs with regard to beneficiary selection and distribution are more efficient than the Government schemes, they remain limited to their working areas or their beneficiaries (in other programmes like micro credit). Therefore, many needy persons are excluded from their aid.

In the VGD scheme Taka 150 is given instead of 15 kg Atta. It is very hard to buy Atta at the rate of Taka 10 per kg. Research from PPRC^h in 2005 shows that per kg Atta costs Taka 17. This is another process that deprives the poor people.

A government relief officer (not the officer based in Chilmari) informed us that the price hike of rice and its scarcity occurred in 2005 due to giving cash for work instead of food for work. In food for work programme hard core poor people get the gain directly; so demand for rice in the market stays low; while rice supply to the poor increases. In contrast, when cash for work was introduced, the supply of the rice in the country fell down but demand in the market rose, because the workers rushed to buy rice with the money received from work. Moreover, some unscrupulous merchants hoarded rice to manipulate market price; and a portion of the rice sold for enquiring for giving the workers cash instead of grain was also trapped in their hands. All these factors contributed to worsen the Monga of 2005.

Lack of awareness of Monga relief programme: It was evident in the field that the lack of awareness among people about the assistance programmes is a major factor that allows the local officials to embezzle aid. People do not know when or how much relief will be available, or on what criteria it will be distributed. About 34% of the people in our census said that the authorities do not inform them about the aid distribution (Table-4). If such information is made available to all aid receivers they will be able to demand their rights and the programmes will be more transparent and effective.

^g Akhter U. Ahmed, etel. 1995

^h Hossain Zillur Rahman, Monga forecast 2005

Lack of Monitoring and Evaluation: At present little monitoring and evaluation of the government programmes is done. NGO programmes are self-evaluated. The necessity of better monitoring, evaluation and follow-up was felt that for both Government and NGO programmes. The programmes should be transparent and accountable to the community. Stringent supervision and rigorous evaluation by a third party could enhance the success and transparency those programmes.

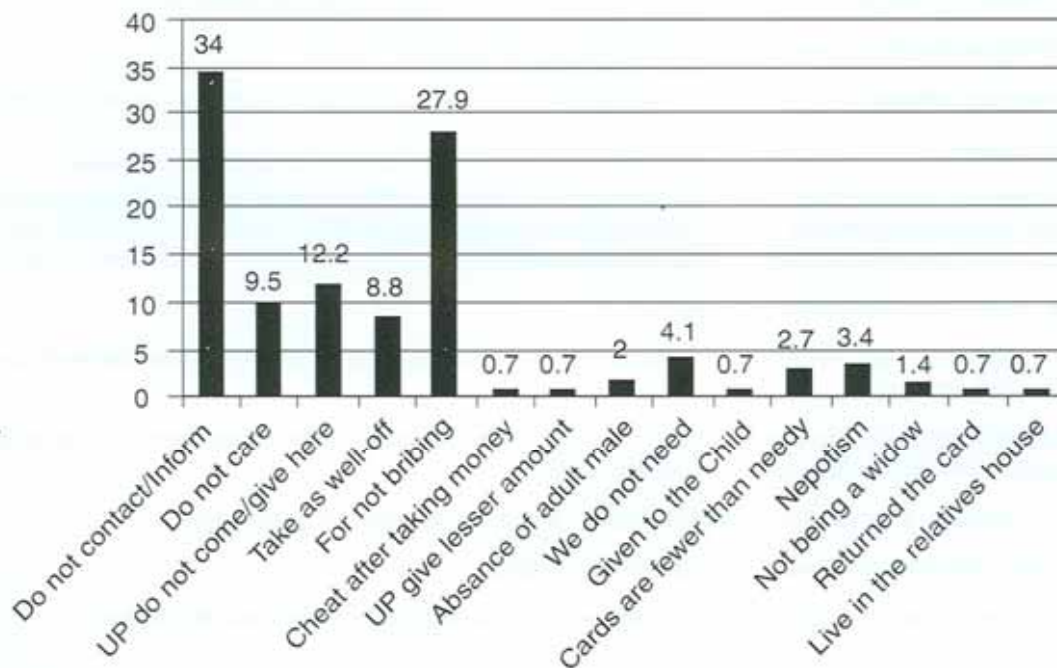
Demand for work not relief: The Majority of the poor people interviewed expressed their disregard receiving relief. They are not interested to survive only on relief. They said -

We have to pursue day after day for relief; if we are lucky enough we get it, hence it is inadequate, run out within few days. Moreover, it is stolen by the authority; they are benefited by relief, we do not. On the other hand we can look for works in those periods; it makes us idle. We want work and wages for work. If we are paid for work; the chairmen, members and others will not be able to snatch our dues'.

(Though most of them do not mind to get; and some of them rebuked us to asking questions only; rather than delivering goods).

(Table 4)

Why did you not get the aid? (Percent)



Source: BLAST household census, Chilmari, 2006

Some research studies also indicate that programmes such as Food-for-Work that also help in local infrastructure development have positive impact on agricultural productivity, employment, wage income, food security for the poor and also in rural non farm sector¹.

It is obvious that hard-core poor people in the area need institutional support in the lean periods whether as relief or programmes like food for work. Most people preferred the food-for-work scheme. But many people (such as elderly, ill or men and women in certain situations - lactating mother, disable) could not participate in such programmes and therefore also needed to be able to access supplementary aid programmes simultaneously.

I do not recommend cash-for-work, because, even if they get cash, they might not be able to buy sufficient grain with it; market price of the food stuff may rise or scarcity (induced or not) may occur that will impair the supply of food. Another crucial point is the timing of these assistance programmes. In many cases, help does not reach the people when it is needed most. Given that Monga is a recurrent event, aid programmes should be designed earlier in order to ensure a response at the very beginning of the hardship.

The assessment of the local needs is also necessary. If the for help could be Proper appraisal of local demand will enable more effective assistance with limited resource and reduce waste.

Recommendations

1. The VGF programme has to overcome its difficulties
2. Stringent monitoring and evaluation of VGF scheme is necessary. Possibly by a third party
3. Bribery of the UP representatives and others concerned should be stopped
4. Beneficiary selection should be done in a participatory way with consulting the local people; not only with the elites
5. The quantity of food aid should be increased
6. Information about the time, place and amount of aid should be publicly announced through out the area. Any other information about the status of such assistance programmes should be available for the public and authorities should deliver these at once when demanded
7. Aid must be provided with food grains
8. Cash for work is not preferable. Well planned Food for work could be a good programme that could build local infrastructure
9. Employments have to be created locally in the agriculture and cottage industry. Employment creation for unskilled workers in near by towns will also be helpful
10. According to some people- prevention of river erosion can be helpful to fight Monga
11. Local infrastructure development could also be helpful
12. Land reform and distribution of land of absent owners among landless could also be effective
13. Short term interest less loan could also help the poor to fight Monga
14. Making the crop seeds available timely at a cheap rate could increase agricultural production and food security

¹ Akhter U. Ahmed, etel. 1995

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