

# **Monga - Seasonal Food Insecurity in Bangladesh - Bringing the Information Together**

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**- first published in the Journal of Social Studies -**

Sebastian Zug, "Monga - Seasonal Food Insecurity in Bangladesh - Bringing the Information Together" in *The Journal of Social Studies*, No. 111, July-Sept. 2006, Centre for Social Studies, Dhaka.

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Monga or seasonal food insecurity is not a new phenomenon in rural Bangladesh, but the topic just started to catch public interest in the last years. Pushed by the media, it became part of the political debate between the government and opposition parties and also found its way into Bangladesh's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. To the NGOs and other actors in the development process monga is now an important concern, for which they collect funds and implement programmes.

The basic explanation of the monga phenomenon is widely known: employment and income opportunities of the rural poor strongly decrease between transplantation and harvest of paddy. The lack of income reduces their ability to cover nutritional requirements. Actors, who are involved in the issue, have built up a good knowledge about the problem, but this knowledge is so far not being adequately shared and not accessible. This article is an attempt to bring the knowledge together in order to analyze monga comprehensively.

## **Methodology**

The article is based on different information sources. Various secondary data was reviewed. Scientific literature with a focus on seasonal poverty in the context of Bangladesh is only very limited available. The topic is strongly interlinked with poverty in general and issues like ecological vulnerability, coping strategies and economy. Valuable information related to monga could be found in those publications. Various

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reports of NGOs have also been taken into consideration, although the information given there has to be seen critical, as these reports are mainly not based on a systematic analysis and are sometimes very biased. To analyse the macro level, statistical data, mainly from the *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics* was used. As not much is written about monga, expert interviews with scientists and NGO workers helped to get a broader view on the topic.

An empirical study was conducted on an embankment and on two *chars*<sup>1</sup> of Teesta River in Sundarganj Upazila in the north of Gaibandha District. Most of the study area was covered by an economic empowerment programme of the local NGO *Gana Unnayan Kendra* (GUK) in its initial phases. Working closely together with staff of the NGO made it easier to get in contact with the people in the area, but it also might have had an influence on their answers. A very qualitative methodology was used. Various families have been interviewed one or several times and focussed group discussions have been conducted. Interviews were not restricted to people affected by monga, but were also held with traders, landowners and government officials.

### **Defining Monga**

Monga is a seasonal food insecurity in ecologically vulnerable and economically weak parts of north-western Bangladesh, primarily caused by an employment and income deficit before *aman*<sup>2</sup> is harvested. It mainly affects those rural poor, who have an undiversified income that is directly or indirectly based on agriculture.

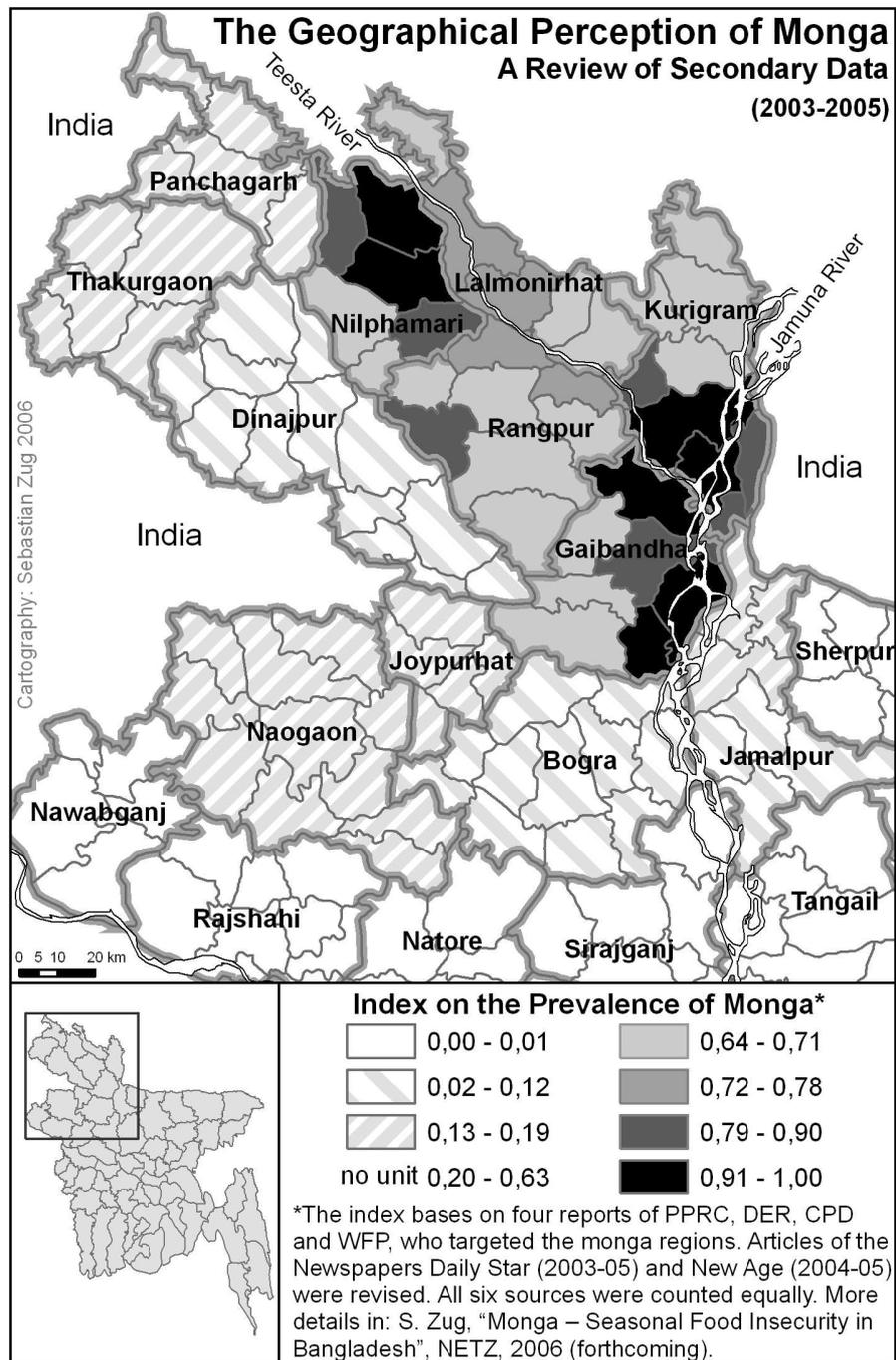
The lean season reduces the people's access to income, which is a shock on their livelihoods. People with low capacities, hit by this seasonal shock, have to reduce their nutritional intake. The seasonal shock, however, is only the trigger of monga. If people were not chronically poor, they would have the capability to cope with this shock. Monga is therefore not a problem of food availability, but of lacking access to food. In the following chapters the two major reasons for monga, chronic poverty and the seasonal shock, will be analyzed.

The definition of monga is restricted to the lean season preceding the *aman* harvest in the Bangla months of *Ashwin* and *Kartik* (mid September to mid November) although there is a second lean season before *boro*<sup>3</sup> is harvested. As this lean season is usually less severe, it will be called *little monga*.

In the public discussion monga is strongly related to the seasonal food insecurity in several districts in north-western Bangladesh. It is a problem, that monga is also understood as a synonym for seasonal food insecurity in general. The use of the term monga for both cases suggests that there is no food insecurity in other regions of Bangladesh. However, it is also a problem there<sup>4</sup>, although generally less severe.

So far no study has been conducted on the geographical incidence of seasonal food insecurity or monga. The following map only shows a perception of monga.

## Geographical perspective on Monga



The map shows that Gaibandha, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Nilpharmari and Rangpur, which together form Greater Rangpur, were most frequently mentioned as ‘the monga districts’. The primary affected upazilas within these districts are those along Teesta and Jamuna River. Agreeing on this public hypothesis, reasons for this geographic deviation can be analysed.

## Underdevelopment of Greater Rangpur

There is a significant correlation between the 'monga region' from the map and upazilas which were classified by the World Food Program (WFP) in cooperation with the Government of Bangladesh as having the biggest proportion of people living below the lower poverty line<sup>5</sup>. This means that the incidence of chronic poverty in these areas is comparatively higher.

The 'monga region' is economically weaker than other regions. As no comprehensive study on a regional comparison concerning economy is available, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) can give a rough guideline. Table 1 shows that the per capita GDP of these districts is far below the national average and the one of Gaibandha is the lowest in whole Bangladesh.

Table 1: GDP of the Districts of Greater Rangpur (1999/2000)

	Per capita GDP		Manufacturing (Category Of the GDP)	
	in taka	% of national average	In taka	% of national average
Gaibandha	12444	67,2%	400	14,7%
Kurigram	13757	74,3%	341	12,5%
Lalmonirhat	13855	74,8%	254	9,3%
Nilpharmari	13292	71,8%	263	9,7%
Rangpur	14936	80,7%	820	30,1%
Bangladesh	18511	100,0%	2720	100,0%

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2002 – *Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 2004, p.495 and p.506-568.

Taking only the GDP's component of manufacturing into consideration, Bangladesh is very heterogeneous. Lalmonirhat, Nilpharmari and Kurigram are the three districts with the lowest productivity in this sector in Bangladesh. Industrialization in Greater Rangpur is far below the national average. Only in Rangpur, mainly industries related to the processing of tobacco provide employment for a significant number of people. In the other districts and in most of the rural parts of Rangpur District, off-farm income for the unskilled rural poor is restricted to the brickfields, the rice and saw mills, earth works and rickshaw pulling

Their major employment opportunity is agricultural labour, as there is only very limited demand from other sectors. The unequal land distribution combined with the lacking alternatives results in a very high share of agricultural labour households<sup>6</sup> in the region.

Although Greater Rangpur is a food surplus area<sup>7</sup>, agriculture cannot provide enough employment for the big agricultural labour force. This leads to a very low wage rate in Greater Rangpur. In 2004 the daily average wage for male labourers of 50.9 Taka per day without meals made up only 68% of the average wage rate in Bangladesh (74.5 taka). Only Greater Dinajpur had a similar low wage rate (52.1 taka). Agricultural labourers in all other greater districts were significantly higher paid with 60.7 to 109 taka per day.<sup>8</sup> A major reason for the low employment opportunities is the lack of agricultural diversification. Agricultural production in the districts is mainly based on paddy, while labour intensive high-value crops like vegetables are only rarely cultivated.

Reasons for the economic backwardness of the region are manifold. The big distance to the important markets in Dhaka and the harbour in Chittagong might be one of the major reasons. It leads to a competitive disadvantage for the production and marketing of agricultural and non-agricultural products.

In a political system that is based on patronage, it is important for the development of one region that representatives of that region are also represented in the government to advocate for the region. Many people in Greater Rangpur are still affiliated with the former President General Ershad and his party has a stronghold in the region. In the election of 1991 and 1996 the later governing coalitions could not win a single constituency. Since 2001 their number has increased, but 5 of 22 seats won by BNP or Jaamat-e-Islami are still very low.

The comparison on the macro level shows that Greater Rangpur is less developed than most other regions in Bangladesh, especially concerning economy. A special underdevelopment of *char* lands and the flood and erosion affected mainland, which forms a reasonable proportion of Greater Rangpur, contributes to this underdevelopment. These areas are also the ones, which are mainly affected by chronic poverty and munga.

#### **Underdevelopment of the *Chars* and the flood affected mainland**

The rivers Jamuna and its biggest contributor Teesta have a big influence on the livelihoods of many people in Greater Rangpur. The *chars* in northern Bangladesh belong to the poorest settlement areas in whole Bangladesh.

Life on the *chars* is determined by the nature of the rivers. All people are confronted with the floods in the months preceding the munga every year. The floods differ in their severity and frequently result in a loss of assets for the population. Houses are damaged and the unpredictability of the flood can also hamper agricultural activities. Livestock rearing becomes a hard task, as animals die because of the water and a shortage of fodder. Employment opportunities decrease and the physical health of people is weakened as diseases become more frequent.

The *char* dwellers and those who live along the banks of the rivers are also confronted with river erosion. The river takes away their homestead and their land possessions, if they have any. People are being displaced and frequently settle on new emerged *char* land or on the governmental owned embankments. Their access to good work, loans, etc. is limited, as new relationships to patrons have to be established. As land rights are very complicated, and the land administration is very corrupted, poor people often lose their land to the powerful.

Living on the *chars* is not very comfortable. Those who have more capacity leave and nearly only the rural poor, living from agricultural day-labouring, share cropping and share rearing for absentee landlords, remain. Alternative income sources are even scarcer than on the mainland. There are no brickfields, less paddy processing, very limited construction and road works, no rickshaws and only few possibilities for business activities.

The access of people to different services is very weak. Government services like health care, agricultural extension, electrification or information are not or only very limited available on the *chars*. Statistical data on Gaibandha District shows a clearly lower literacy rate on the *chars*, which is a clear indicator for weak education services to those people in the past.<sup>9</sup> Also the NGOs were working only marginally on the *chars* for

a long time. This is currently changing and services are increasing. The access to government services on the mainland, to the markets and to alternative employment opportunities is more difficult for the people from the *chars*, as many *chars* are very remote and it takes a lot of time and also money to reach the mainland.

The people living on the *chars*, and the displaced landless on the embankments are more exposed to chronic poverty than most other people in the districts of Greater Rangpur. It is mainly them who have difficulties to cope with the seasonal shock, created by the lean season.

### **Facing the lean season**

The lean season preceding the harvest of *aman* is strongly connected to paddy cultivation, as there are nearly no other crops being planted. The agricultural lean season directly affects the cultivators, who can be the owner of the fields or the people who cultivate it as sharecropping, lease or mortgage. The lean season, however, normally only turns into *monga* for those who are doing marginal farming and have low capacities. The second directly affected group are the agricultural labourers who work on the fields of others.

In the process of paddy cultivation there are mainly two periods, when a big labour force is needed. Some thirty days after the seedlings have been sown on a very small field, they have to be transplanted to a big field. Within about one week lots of work has to be done for ploughing the field several times, for levelling and for the transplantation of the seedlings. The second labour intensive step is the harvest which gives work for cutting, transporting and husking. In between transplantation and harvest, intercrop activities can only provide limited labour. Fertilizer and possible pesticide application needs nearly no labour. One to two times weeding is the only step in-between, which can employ a significant number of people some 20 to 30 days after transplantation.

It is not possible to fix the times of agricultural labour need for rice cultivation into the calendar because planting and transplanting times differ strongly as they depend on rain and the flood situation. Furthermore the farmers use different varieties which need different inputs and have a different maturing time. However, between transplantation and harvest many labourers cannot earn enough money from agricultural employment for covering their basic needs.

Like the agricultural labourers also the marginal farmers face *monga*. Their financial assets reduce towards the harvest. They have to give successive inputs like seeds, fertilizer and they sometimes have to spend money for labour, as well, if they cannot manage to do all the work by themselves, especially during transplantation. They receive the return for their work not until after harvest. The financial resources of many marginal farmers are not enough to ensure the inputs for their crops and sufficient food for their families in the same time.

During the *monga* season it is also very difficult for unskilled workers to find alternative employment opportunities, mainly because of the climatic conditions. As it is still raining and the flood water has not removed completely, there is only very limited work available in the construction sector, for earth works and on the brickfields. The seven brickfields in Sundarganj Upazila are operated from mid of November to March and employ up to 300 labours at one time including those who transport soil by rickshaw

van to the brickfield. During the monga period only few labourers are needed to take preparation for the coming production.

Seasonal migration is an opportunity to earn money for the capable men, but during monga migration opportunities decrease, as the agricultural lean season affects all Bangladesh. Some employment is available towards the end of monga because harvest starts earlier in some districts. Like in the monga affected areas non-agricultural sectors also offer less employment in most other districts because of rainfall. The limited work at the migration destinations is mainly given to local labourers.

In the major cities the demand for rickshaw pullers, which is an important work of seasonal migrants, remains stable. However, as scarcity affects many people during the monga season, more people come to the cities like Dhaka to work as a rickshaw puller. According to rickshaw pullers in Dhaka, it becomes difficult to rent a rickshaw and some garages also increase the rent. Their income is substantially lower, because there are fewer passengers per rickshaw and competition makes prices decrease. Various types of seasonal migration are done during monga, but the profit is far lower than in other periods.

Decreased access to employment and income is the major reason for monga. Adverse market dynamics accelerate the problem. The price of rice usually increases until harvest and vegetables are very expensive as it is off-season. However, the price for many things people can sell, like livestock, trees and bamboo to allocate money for consumption, decreases in Sundarganj because the supply is higher than the demand.

### **Who is affected by Monga?**

The biggest group of people affected by monga are those families whose income mainly depends on agricultural labour and marginal farming. The above mentioned employment opportunities like construction works or all types of migration are mainly done by those people, who do agricultural labour in other times.

Some groups or individuals are indirectly affected by the agricultural lean season. This is the case for all those who depend on the income of people affected by the agricultural lean season. The turn-over of most shops in Sundarganj and stalls on the markets selling non-food items decreases during monga, as the cash availability is low for the poor but also for the landlords, whose consumption strongly increases after harvest. This decrease can lead to monga especially for those having very small businesses like the hawkers selling crockery, cheap jewellery or ice-cream to the people in the villages.

One of the most vulnerable groups consists of the families or individuals, who live on the generosity of others. Many families, who have no male earner, because of death, disability, illness, divorce, etc. go begging. Interviews showed that they face a big seasonal fluctuation in their income. During the harvest time people in the villages give a lot of alms, mainly in form of paddy. The beggars store the paddy and also sell some on the market to receive some money. When the resources and income sources of other people run short, they stop or strongly reduce their support for the beggars.

A big income source for the rural poor is rickshaw and *van* pulling. During monga their income decreases, as there are very few agricultural products to be transported. Decrease in income affects them probably less than agricultural labourers, but they already had very low income during the rainy season.

In Sundarganj a Hindu cast is producing bamboo products. Their most important products are big baskets for storing rice and *kulas* which are used for winnowing paddy. During monga they suffer, as nobody buys their products and they have no work, because they can only afford to buy a limited amount of bamboo to produce in advance.

Monga mainly affects those groups of people described above. There is a tendency, that families are better-off, if they have a higher diversified income. Income diversification often leads to a general improvement of the family's situation and it can also reduce the seasonal shock affecting their livelihood. One family on one of the study *chars* earns its living from two major sources. They cultivate some small lands and the household head works as a carpenter. Employment in this profession increases before the end of monga, as people have to build up storage facilities for the coming harvest. Income diversification is not easy, as there are not many opportunities. Although migration is not very lucrative during monga, it was frequently mentioned by people in the study area, that those families with seasonal migrants, are suffering less from monga.

### **Coping with monga**

Many families, who are chronically poor and who are hit by the seasonal shock, try to prevent food insecurity by using various coping strategies. The most effective strategy to prevent monga by the individual family is probably to reduce their vulnerability or chronic poverty. If they manage to open new income sources or to increase their income in normal times, they minimize the risk that the lean season seriously affects their livelihoods.

Additional income opportunities can also be created specifically for the monga period. Planting trees like olive can provide income, as it is harvested during the monga season. However, these kinds of strategies were not applied autonomously by the people in the study area. The people had to be supported by a NGO to do so.

An independent accumulation of savings for the monga season was only rarely done in the study area. Most families can save some money or paddy, but they frequently mentioned that doing savings sufficiently is very difficult. They live from hand to mouth in other seasons as well and they often have to spend their surplus to pay back loans, oftentimes taken in the last monga season.

If people face monga, they minimize their expenses, firstly for things like clothing, crockery and ice-cream for the children that are not of urgent need. Buying materials for repairing the house or a tube well is normally postponed to the harvest period.

Working opportunities are subject to demand and supply, while the demand for employment is very high during monga, the supply is very low. As people are very needy for income, they accept low wages because of the competition with other labourers. Rahman<sup>10</sup> compared the wage rates during 10<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> October 1991 with the rates in other times, when *various agricultural activities are in full swing*. The wage rate halved from 26 to 13 taka per day in Greater Rangpur. The other important strategy to receive employment is to migrate, as explained above.

In the time of crises people have also the possibility to transform some assets into money to cover their daily expenses. It is reported that families sold<sup>11</sup> or took a mortgage<sup>12</sup> on their land. This strongly reduces their livelihood capacity for the future

because land is the most important productive asset in rural areas. In the working area also livestock, trees and bamboo was sold, mainly below the normal market price.

Money-lending is a common strategy used by the poor during the monga period to allocate money for covering basic needs. People in the study area have no access to formal short-term loans for consumption. They have to use the services of informal moneylenders. The moneylenders know about the problematic situation of the monga affected people and they can therefore profit from their vulnerability by taking very high interest rates.

In various reports on monga, different conditions for money-lending were mentioned. In the working area mainly two types were predominant. During normal times people can receive loans with 10% interest per month from local moneylenders, who mainly but not exclusively live on the mainland.

During the months of *Ashwin* and *Kartik* people can often only receive loans with even worse conditions. If they take a loan of 500 taka, they mostly have to pay back 500 taka and one *mound* of paddy which in Sundarganj is equal to 42kg and was worth some 350-400 taka during harvest of *aman* in 2005. It can be assumed that the people take the loan for about 3 months. In this case they pay a monthly interest rate of about 25%. If they take the loan closer towards the end of monga this monthly interest rate is even higher. A lot of people did not manage to pay back their loans or paid back only part of it after harvest. Some were pressured to give another *mound* of paddy while others had or still have to pay a regular monthly interest rate of 10% like described above.

Getting a loan with better conditions depends upon the relation to people who are able to give out loans. Some people manage to get loans with small or without interest from extended family members. Interviews with people who make their living from begging showed that even loans with bad conditions are not available for them, as their capacity is low and moneylenders do not want to take the risk not to be paid back the money. The interviews also gave the impression that those who are poorer had to pay higher interest as those who have more assets or better income opportunities. The conclusion would be that moneylenders will take high interest rates if their risk of being not refunded is high.

Many people take loans from different moneylenders, as moneylenders either do not provide loans that are high enough or they do not give a second loan before an old loan is paid back. As moneylenders usually do not know how many other loans a family already took, they give also loans to people, who are already deep in dept. To those families it is very hard to develop their lives because the burden of the instalments is high.

Those people who have a bit more capacity can also buy on credit in the local shops or at a close-by market, if they know the owner of the shop. People take goods from the shop and repay usually in the next days, if they have income. During monga they frequently repay after one month or even later. If people borrow for more than a couple of days, they have to pay back one taka extra for one kg of rice. This is a relatively low interest rate. But getting such a loan is restricted to the opinion of the shopkeeper about the ability of the borrower to repay. The poorest are therefore also excluded from this borrowing system. Anyway the amount of money which can be borrowed in this way is comparably low. People can receive goods worth about 100 taka maximum without payment from one shop.

Most of the people know that they will have income during the coming harvest. They either expect yield or employment. Some people try to sell these future potentials. Bhattacharya<sup>13</sup> reports about farmers, who sold one *mound* of paddy for 175-200 taka in advance during Monga 2004, which was worth about 350 taka<sup>14</sup> during the following harvest period. Agricultural day-labourers often sell working days in the harvest period in advance. Labourers in the study area receive about 40 taka, if they sell their labour in advance. The wage rate during harvest is about 70 taka.

It is obvious that these systems of money-lending and advanced sale of labour and harvest are very exploitative. Not only during monga, but also in normal times, 10% interest per month is far too high. Those who are lending out the money have very high profit and they put a big pressure on the livelihood capacities of those who are taking the loans. It has to be clearly analyzed why they are doing so and why they seem to have no social responsibility towards the people who are oftentimes their neighbours or members of their community. The poor people mostly have no other choice, than to accept their conditions, as they do not have a lot alternatives to allocate money from other sources. Rahman states for Greater Rangpur that *there are relatively few resource-rich people, who could be a major source of crisis-period borrowing to tide over the deficit period*<sup>15</sup>. The number of moneylenders and the amount of money that can be lent out is therefore limited. During monga many people need to take a loan, but the supply is not able to cover the demand. This makes it possible for the moneylenders to take high interests.

These coping strategies bring certain mitigation for the people during the crisis period, but they also prolong the time of shortage, as for them monga is not finished when harvest starts. They either have to use most of their money for repaying loans or they do not earn from the yield they produce or the work they are doing, because they were already paid before.

People are members of various networks, from which they can profit during times of crises. The most important of those is the extended family. If one family from the network suffers exclusively or to a bigger degree from a crisis, they can be supported by their relatives. Relatives may give them food or borrow money without or with low interest.

Hasan<sup>16</sup> found in his study that community support plays a major role to support the weakest segments of the local community. People would not allow other people in the community starve to death. Even though most of them are very needy, the neighbours would share their scarce food with them.

Beside their personal network, people can try to access services of NGOs and the government, who frequently offer short term measures during times of food insecurity. The NGOs and the government carry out Food-for-Work or Cash-for-Work programs to build and maintain streets and to raise common or individual grounds for flood protection. If one member of the family receives such an employment for a substantial time span and earns some 50 to 70 taka per day, his family will probably not have to reduce their daily food intake. Frequently, the government and the NGOs give direct relief to the affected during monga. It is not part of this article to evaluate the strategies to address monga, but these kinds of short-time measures can have effects on other strategies. People know that they will be supported if the situation becomes worse. This can decrease their motivation to establish own preventive strategies. A lot of corruption is taking place in the governmental relief system. Investing in bribe for receiving a VGD

card which provides monthly some 30 kg of rice for 18 month can be a worthwhile investment during times of surplus and can therefore be seen as preventive strategy of the individual.

People usually do not rely on one a single coping strategy, but try to find various strategies to overcome or to minimize the impact of monga. Although they might use various strategies to allocate food and money, they often have to reduce their nutritional intake.

### **Manifestation of Monga**

For those who seriously start to reduce food intake, the lean season turns into monga. People reduce the amount of food by taking fewer meals per day or by reducing the quantity per meal. Interviews with different families showed that food intake is reduced to one or two meals per day and sometimes they are not eating at all. Most of them consume two or three meals during normal times.

The quality of foods is being reduced in various ways. People stop buying comparatively expensive items for their meals. They consume less milk, eggs and vegetables. Meat is out of reach for most of the rural poor also during good times. People reduce the quality of their foods and buy unclean broken rice, which is about 25% cheaper on the local market. One family reported that they sort out small broken pieces of rice from the chaff, which is used by their better-off neighbour as a burning material. Some families also change to wheat, if the rice price exceeds the price for wheat. Furthermore people consume foods that they do not eat during normal times. They collect wild growing taro varieties and eat parts of the banana tree.

Monga has an effect on the people's health condition in a short-term run. Their physical capacities decrease and they become more exposed to diseases like diarrhoea. As money is short medical treatment is often not possible.

Monga is a cyclical setback for the affected families. Their physical capacities decrease in a long-term run and chronic poverty is accelerated by the negative impacts of the coping strategies, like indebtedness.

### **The Severity of Monga**

In an inter-annual comparison, monga differs in time and severity. The impact of the lean season on the livelihood of the individual and on the overall situation in the region is determined by a wide range of factors.

As the harvest of *aman* usually marks the end of monga and the cultivation process provides employment, the stability of this crop is very important. Sometimes the flood lasts too long and the farmers cannot plant crops or they have to wait until they can transplant the seedlings. If the seedlings are transplanted late the yield decreases. The standing *aman* crop is sometimes also damaged by excess rains or if the flood unexpectedly returns. If such damages affect the crop, the farmer's income decreases and less employment is offered to agricultural day-labourers. Monga becomes therefore a more serious problem in the respective year. End of July 2006 several people in the study area already predicted the monga to be more problematic this year, as there was a lack of rain during the transplantation time, which led to a total loss of crops for several farmers.

The time before the lean season is very important for the people to build up enough capacities to cope with the situation. People are less prepared for the lean season

if the preceding *boro* harvest was poor or if the floods were strong and destroyed a lot of assets.

During *monga* various aspects have influence on the people's ability to purchase food. The degree of price increase differs from year to year. To Rahman<sup>17</sup> 2005 was a year when the disproportionate price hike of essentials created an additional component of vulnerability.

Activities of NGOs and the government can have a direct impact on the *monga* situation in a community. During the *monga* in 2005 different NGOs implemented Cash-for-Work programmes on the *chars* of the study area. Most affected families had an income of about 1000 taka for 15 days work. If they were asked about the severity of *monga* during the last years, most stated that the *monga* in 2005 was not severe because of the employment given to them.

For the *monga* phenomenon in a certain region the above described factors determine how severe the situation in the respective year will be. This degree of severity, however, is not the same for every single household. Although the general *monga* might be moderate in the village, individual families can be affected worse than in other years. The reasons can be illness, a disproportional big loss of assets during floods, indebtedness because of dowry, etc.

The famine of 1974 in Bangladesh bears an analogy to the *monga* phenomenon. Heavy flooding during summer and autumn 1974 led to extensive damages on the newly planted *aman* crop and employment opportunities for the agricultural labourers decreased stronger than usual. The traders expected a low supply of paddy for the coming harvest and therefore a high price. Overestimations of the shortfall led to a price explosion which peaked in November. The rural poor, weakened by the severe lean season, could not fulfil their basic needs because the prices were too high. Like *monga*, the famine 1974 was not a problem of availability, as the preceding harvests were good and the stocks were full, it was created by a lacking access of the people. The cause of the famine 1974 can be seen as a very severe *monga* and Greater Rangpur was said to be the worst affected region.<sup>18</sup>

As there are two major seasons for rice cultivation in Bangladesh, there are also two lean seasons. The *monga* in the months of *Ashwin* and *Kartik* is very present in public, while the media is rarely reporting about the *little monga* in the Month of *Chaitra* (mid March to mid April). Many people in the study area mentioned that the *little monga* is also a problem for them, as working opportunities reduce, but it is less severe. The major reasons for the differences between these two lean seasons are connected to agricultural differences of crop cultivation during the *aman* and *boro* season. Crop diversification in the *boro* season is far higher, especially on the *chars*, where paddy cultivation is less suitable because intensive irrigation is hardly possible. Other crops offer alternative employment in those times when there is no demand for *boro* cultivation. As the cultivation of *boro* is more intensive, paddy cultivation needs more labour.

There are less natural hazards which influence the planting of *boro* and endanger the yield. The risk and the seasonal variation of this lean season are therefore less. The profit of the farmers and the income of the labourers are higher during the harvest period of *boro*. The yield is higher and the harvest has to be done very quickly, because of the starting rains. The relative high security to receive income after the *boro* lean season makes it easier to cope with it. During the *little monga* there are comparatively more

alternative income opportunities as it is peak season for construction and earth works. Additionally, the brickfields still employ a high number of labourers.

### **Monga in the political debate**

Nowadays, the term monga is widely known in Bangladesh. Media reports about the seasonal food insecurity by using the term monga very frequently. Furthermore, the term has also been politicised, and the debate on the topic in the capital Dhaka is sometimes far from the real necessities.

The opposition regularly blames the government for not taking sufficient steps to address monga. While the government was hosting the big SAARC meeting in November 2005 the opposition leader Sheikh Hasina attacked the government for not taking monga serious: *I also request the government headed by Prime Minister to visit immediately the monga-affected districts of the region.* She attacked the government in a populist manner concerning the costly decoration of Dhaka City for the meeting: *Had the government allocated a portion of the money spent for such a gorgeous illumination, the acute poverty-hit people of the northern region would have get a meal.*<sup>19</sup> Awami League and other opposition parties frequently carried out own relief programs in the 'monga region' to underline the weak performance of the government.

Likewise also the government uses monga to show that their programs are successfully tackling monga. The governmental *National News Agency of Bangladesh* (BSS) quoted official sources during monga 2005 as saying that *adequate steps taken by the government [in form of an] adequate supply of food grains helped the people to overcome the monga in all the districts of greater Rangpur. [...] So-called 'Monga' exists only in the media reports now-a-days.*<sup>20</sup>

The Bangladeshi society is highly sensitized for famine and related issues. The last big famines of 1943 and 1974 are still well remembered. *There is a widespread perception within the political elite of the country that the occurrence of a famine so soon after independence caused a massive crisis of legitimacy for the then government whose violent overthrow a year later was seen as an expression of this loss of legitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy due to failure to contain the famine appears to have become for subsequent governments a crucial political concern.*<sup>21</sup> The debate on monga is strongly related to this psychology of famine, because the political actors fear to be made responsible for a famine or to be accused that they are not engaged enough to prevent famine or starvation.

### **Conclusion**

Monga is a result of chronic poverty in the northern districts of Bangladesh and it is also an important reason for it. It is a cyclical set-back for the development of the individual family, the community and the whole region.

To stop this cycle depends upon the ability of the various actors in the development process to find solutions for chronic poverty in general and monga in particular. It cannot be enough to focus on relief, asset transfer and micro-credit. Strategies have to go beyond economic empowerment to change the lives of the rural poor in the region. A big focus has to be put on strengthening local security mechanisms and reforming local power structures, to make development sustainable.

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- <sup>1</sup> *chars* are instable island in the river formed from alluvial sediments.
- <sup>2</sup> *aman* is the rice grown in the monsoon season
- <sup>3</sup> *boro* is the rice grown in the dry season
- <sup>4</sup> e.g. N. Ahmad, *Slip Trip Tumble - Determining Landlessness in Rural Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 2005, p.78.
- <sup>5</sup> Bangladesh Planning Commission and WFP, *The Food Security Atlas of Bangladesh*, 2005, p.12. People below the lower poverty line can only afford to consume less than 1.805 kcal per day.
- <sup>6</sup> Between 40.2% and 50.5% of all holdings of the districts of greater Rangpur, were agricultural labour households in 1996. The national average is with 35.9% substantially lower. Data Source: The Bangladesh Census of Agriculture (Rural) 1996, Vol.1. Cited in: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *2002 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 2004, p.163-164.
- <sup>7</sup> According to the Data of Kabir greater Rangpur had a surplus in rice and wheat of 37% in 1999/2000. (M. Kabir, "Conceptualization and Measurement of Food Insecurity: The context of Bangladesh." *BIISS Journal* 26(1), 2005, pp.55-90, p.87.)
- <sup>8</sup> see Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Yearbook of Agricultural Statistics of Bangladesh 2004*, Dhaka, 2005, p. 204-209.
- <sup>9</sup> see Zug, S. "Monga – Seasonal Food Insecurity in Bangladesh", NETZ, 2006 (forthcoming). Data source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. *Population Census 2001, Community Series Gaibandha*. Dhaka, 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> H. Z. Rahman, "Mora Kartik: Seasonal Deficits and Vulnerability of the Rural Poor.", Pp. 234-253, in *Rethinking Rural Poverty - Bangladesh as a Case Study*, edited by H. Z. Rahman, and M. Hossain, Dhaka, 1995a, p.237. Data source: Analysis of Poverty Trends Project, BIDS: Rapid Survey, 1991.
- <sup>11</sup> e.g. DER, "Report from the Special DER Meeting on 'Monga' 2004", 2004, p.1.
- <sup>12</sup> e.g. H. Z. Rahman 1995a, *op. cit*, p.253
- <sup>13</sup> see, D. Bhattacharya et. al., "State of the Bangladesh Economy Early Signals of FY2005 (First Reading)", CPD, 2005, p.109.
- <sup>14</sup> see: Food Planning and Monitoring Unit of the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, "Bangladesh Food Situation Report, January-March 2005" Vol. 62, 2005. Calculated from the paddy price on the town market in Rangpur.
- <sup>15</sup> H.Z. Rahman 1995a, *op.cit*, p.243
- <sup>16</sup> see A. A. M. Hasan, "Looking into the Institutional Response to Monga", Dhaka, BLAST, 2006, p.9.
- <sup>17</sup> see H.Z. Rahman et al., Report on "Monga Forecast 2005 - Field Assessment and Action Plan". PPRC, 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> see J. Drèze and A. Sen, *Hunger and Public Action*, New Delhi, 1998, p.28f.
- <sup>19</sup> Awami League, "Sheikh Hasina blasts lavish illumination" , [www.albd.org/news/2005/11/14/14.htm](http://www.albd.org/news/2005/11/14/14.htm), 14.11.2005 (accessed on 6.6.2006).
- <sup>20</sup> The National News Agency of Bangladesh (BSS), "Monga tackled successfully in greater Rangpur", <http://www.bssnews.net/index.php?genID=BSS-06-2005-11-03&id=7>, 3.11.2005 (accessed on 20.6.2006).
- <sup>21</sup> H. Z. Rahman, "The Political Economy of Poverty-Alleviation.", Pp. 274-279, in *Rethinking Rural Poverty - Bangladesh as a Case Study*, edited by H. Z. Rahman and M. Hossain, Dhaka, 1995b.