

PRCPB Working Paper No. 15: Abstract

Shahabuddin, Quazi & Ali, Zulfiqar (2006). Natural Disasters, Risks, Vulnerability and Persistence of Poverty: An Analysis of Household Level Data. PRCPB Working Paper No. 15. Dhaka/Manchester: PRCPB/Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, CPRC/University of Manchester.

The paper explores the vulnerability and persistence of poverty amongst the rural households in the disaster-prone areas of Bangladesh. It draws upon some of the factors and processes that have prevented certain groups of people in ecologically vulnerable areas escaping from extreme poverty using both household level data and focussed group discussions. In the light of this, special attention has been given to the *monga* problem, which refers to the state of seasonal unemployment and deprivation, especially in the northern districts of Bangladesh. The paper also suggests ways to cope with the vulnerabilities faced by the people living in the river erosion and flood affected areas. Useful insights into comparisons between ecologically favourable and unfavourable zones are also provided in terms of the socio-economic characteristics and poverty status of the households, their coping strategies, as well as their access to services provided by both government and non-government organizations. The study has used quantitative analyses of household level data collected from a 64-village census plus survey conducted under the Programme for Research on Chronic Poverty in Bangladesh (Phase II).

The important conclusions derived from the paper suggest that flood-prone zones are the worst off among different disaster-prone areas in terms of food shortages, the incidence of extreme poor, insufficient income, illiteracy, and a high concentration of wage labourers. Therefore, as expected, access to government programs like the VGD/VGF is the highest in the flood-prone zones. On the contrary, infrastructural services particularly that of roads, are more prevalent in the ecologically favourable areas. The paper observes that groups that appear to be particularly vulnerable include households with limited assets, women-headed households, adolescent unmarried girls, elderly people without family to support them, fishermen, and communities living on the island or attached chars. Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by their inability to reduce the risk of natural disasters. In as high as one-third of the cases, the households, especially in unfavourable zones, do not have any viable coping strategies. For those who have, borrowing and savings are the most common approaches. Interestingly, it was observed that some people (though lesser in proportion) were able to sustain and sometime even improve their economic position compared to others with similar conditions, due to: smaller household size, more earners, better health, diversification in employment, greater migratory tendency, linkages, and motivation.