

Empirical Investigation of Monga Combat Strategies in Northwest Bangladesh

Ubaydur Rahaman Siddiki¹
Mohammad Nayeem Aziz Ansari²

Abstract: Monga, colloquially referred to as a 'famine-like situation,' is a recurrent challenge in specific areas within the Rangpur division of northwest Bangladesh. The impact of Monga is particularly pronounced among agriculturally dependent families and low-income individuals in this region. Its adverse effects extend beyond local livelihoods, detrimentally influencing the socio-economic landscape of the Monga-affected area, which, in turn, poses a vulnerability to the broader national economy of Bangladesh. To ensure the sustainable progress of the country, it becomes imperative to implement diverse strategies aimed at ameliorating the conditions in the northwest regions impacted by Monga. Consequently, both governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have initiated an array of intervention programs with short-term and long-term implications. These initiatives encompass social safety nets, agricultural diversification, and microcredit programs, supplementing the ongoing efforts by focusing on households vulnerable to Monga in northwest Bangladesh. Considering these premises, this study scrutinizes the efficacy of the undertaken measures.

Employing various qualitative methodologies alongside document analysis, this research offers an empirical assessment conducted in a selected village within Domar Upazila in Nilphamari District. This region witnesses substantial engagement from governmental and non-governmental entities striving to combat Monga. The findings underscore how diverse actors' interventions have collectively mitigated the severity of Monga's impact on the villages, including its recurring nature. Among the interventions, the standout program is agricultural diversification incorporating Short Durational Rice (SDR) varieties and multiple cropping, coupled with short-to-long-term social programs like safety nets and community-driven efforts such as the Dhan Bank. While the study unveils the influence of macroeconomic policies on micro-level political economy choices that have reshaped the coping strategies of Monga-affected individuals, it also identifies critical gaps in program coverage, particularly in safety net initiatives. It is evident that only a limited number of existing programs are explicitly designed as risk-reduction measures targeted at addressing the Monga situation. Moreover, the implementation of some short-term solutions occasionally encounters hindrances, often due to internal and external factors. A case in point is the PRIME program, which was discontinued before its scheduled completion in 2011 (PKSF, 2012). Additionally, the prevailing policies and strategies aimed at tackling the Monga situation in Northern Bangladesh predominantly prioritize economic considerations over demographic vulnerabilities, such as the well-being of children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses.

Keywords: Monga, Monga Policy, Food Security, Famine-like Situation, Food Insecurity and Hunger, Northwest Bangladesh

¹ Professor, Department of Geography and Environment, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh (ursgeo@juniv.edu)

² Professor, Department of Geography and Environment, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh (ansari@juniv.edu)

Introduction

The Rangpur region in Northwest Bangladesh stands out as a persistent area of chronic poverty and seasonal food insecurity within the country (Mallick, 2013). The region's seasonal agricultural systems give rise to a distinctive cycle of unemployment and food insecurity, characterized by two distinct periods of vulnerability: a severe one (September-November) and a less severe one (middle March-middle May) (Mallick & Rafi, 2017). This cyclic phenomenon of seasonal hunger, known as 'Monga', gained public attention in the late 1990s, prompting national policymakers to categorize it as a 'famine-like situation' (Mallick, 2013). 'Monga' was initially regarded as a problem localized in the northwest region. However, its formal recognition came only in 2005 when it was officially included in the country's Poverty Reduction Papers (PRPs), confirming its existence (Mallick & Rafi, 2017).

The 'Monga' condition predominantly affects five districts within the Rangpur region, namely Rangpur, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha and Kurigram, as well as fringe regions susceptible to riverbank erosion and recurrent droughts (Mallick & Rafi, 2017). Unofficial estimates provided by Shanto (2006) indicate that around 4.1 million people in the northwest region are affected by 'Monga'. Moreover, research conducted by the Palli Karma-Shahayak Foundation (PKSF), as cited in Mazid's study (2007), highlights the dire 'Monga' situation in 25 out of 35 Upazilas within the five Northern districts of the Rangpur region. This research reveals that over 1.10 million households across these 25 Upazilas and spanning 212 unions are living in poverty, with nearly half of these households constantly grappling with challenges related to 'Monga'. Among them, 25% are classified as poor, 25% as moderately deficient, and the remaining 50% fall under the ultra-poor category (Mallick & Rafi, 2017). Research indicates that those most adversely affected by 'Monga' are agricultural laborers, marginal and small-scale farmers with limited agricultural holdings, landless individuals inhabiting char areas displaced primarily due to riverbank erosion, and households headed by women (Khair & Sikder, 2010).

In recent times, governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have initiated various intervention programs targeting 'Monga'-vulnerable households in northwest Bangladesh. These initiatives comprise both long-term and short-term strategies. They encompass various measures such as social welfare programs, crop diversification schemes, and microfinance schemes, in addition to the regular ones (Mallick & Rafi, 2017). However, a myriad of questions remain. Are the existing policies and measures adequately addressing all vulnerabilities and critical risks? Is there any evidence of implementation gaps or duplication? Do the current Monga-related policies encompass all necessary stakeholders and appropriate entry and exit points for these actors? Are the ongoing implementation efforts sufficient to tackle the prevailing issues effectively, or do they need to be expanded more comprehensively, avoiding tokenistic efforts? Are sustainable outcomes being achieved in remote regions? Given the circumstances, this paper seeks to comprehensively examine the measures undertaken in areas affected by 'Monga'.

Data and Methods

The present research employs a qualitative methodology as its foundation, aiming to delve into a profound understanding of not only the experiences of households and actors but also the intricate social processes that influence and shape their lives. The chosen data collection techniques encompassed two key methods: informal discussions conducted within the community and semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were carefully administered to domestic leaders and staff advocating both public agencies and non-state actors (e.g, NGOs). This methodological selection finds its alignment with the proposition put forth by Hay (2010:72), asserting that the decision to opt for a qualitative research design is intricately interwoven with the theoretical frameworks that guide us, the research endeavours of fellow scholars in our interpretive communities that captivate our interest, and the research inquiries that we aim to address - all of which collectively shape our approach.

The fieldwork phase was executed during the Monga season, a period synonymous with seasonal food scarcity, across various districts within the Rangpur region. This geographical scope encompassed districts including Rangpur, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, and Lalmonirhat, each bearing its unique social and economic dynamics. However, pragmatic considerations necessitated a focused approach, leading this project to concentrate its fieldwork exclusively on Bera Village within Nilphamari's Domar Upazila. This village was selected as the epicenter of the investigation, serving as a microcosm of the broader phenomenon under scrutiny. A succinct portrayal of Bera Village is encapsulated within the presentation provided in Table 1, offering a comprehensive snapshot of its key characteristics and critical selection criteria.

The empirical foundation of this study was derived from rigorous data collection within Bera Village, coupled with insights drawn from the operations and activities of pertinent GOs and NGOs actively engaged in addressing the multifaceted issues stemming from Monga. Notably, the project adopted a Small-N approach, a methodological orientation propounded by Skocpol (1984). This approach champions the idea that within the realm of comparative historical analyses, it is possible to uncover causal configurations that are inherently intertwined and necessitate each other to explain the observed outcomes. By deliberately focusing on a limited number of cases, this methodology seeks to draw out the causal threads that might otherwise be obscured within a larger dataset.

This research's methodology, rooted in qualitative exploration, ventures into the intricate tapestry of human experiences and social dynamics within the context of Monga. The carefully chosen methods of data collection, fieldwork implementation, and analytical approach coalesce to form a robust foundation upon which the subsequent analysis and conclusions are constructed.

Table-1: Study Village Description

Village, Upazila, District	Factors for selecting study village	Traits of the Village*
Bera Village, Domar Upazila Nilphamari District	<u>Frequent Flooding:</u> The village experiences annual flooding. <u>Remote Location with Limited Administrative Services:</u> The village is in an isolated mainland region, marked by the absence of district administrative services and insufficient communication systems. <u>Implementing Small-Scale Short Durational Varieties (SDR):</u> To counteract the challenges posed by Monga, the community has adopted the cultivation of small-scale Short Durational Varieties (SDR). <u>NGO-Led Pumpkin Cultivation on Teesta Riverbed:</u> Women and marginal farmers are engaged in an innovative initiative by NGOs, involving pumpkin cultivation on the Teesta riverbed, aimed at Monga eradication. <u>Absence of GO-Provided Social Safety Nets:</u> The village lacks social safety nets provided by GOs.	The village faces annual flooding owing to its geographical location. It comprises around 150 households, with an average family size of 6. Despite its proximity to the main town of Upazila Sadar, the village lacks modern amenities. The topography is marked by slightly low-lying terrain. The village is predominantly Hindu, although there is a significant Muslim presence. The educational landscape is relatively modest, with an overall education rate ranging between 25% and 30%. Notably, there has been a recent increase in female education in the area. The community's socioeconomic structure revolves predominantly around agriculture, with nearly 90% of the populace lacking land ownership, depending on agricultural labour for their livelihood. In search of alternate employment prospects, a portion of the labour force migrates outside Nilphamari, often heading to urban centres such as Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Noakhali for seasonal work. To address the issues stemming from Monga, a phenomenon of seasonal poverty, the establishment of a Community Dhan Bank has recently become a focal point of interest for both governmental organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Agriculture, with a primary focus on rice cultivation, plays a pivotal role in the region, serving the requirements of marginal and small-scale farmers.

Village, Upazila, District	Factors for selecting study village	Traits of the Village*
		Furthermore, there is a growing interest among farmers in cultivating tobacco and winter vegetables. However, the availability of irrigation facilities remains limited. The participation of women in non-farm activities is noticeably scarce, except for their involvement in seasonal earthen road construction projects sponsored by the government. The construction of the Jamuna Bridge has intensified the trend of male migration towards Dhaka. During the winter season, the area experiences prolonged cold waves that can last for several weeks, posing a significant threat to the villagers' livelihoods.

The study employed purposive sampling; a deliberate technique used to carefully choose a focused yet suitable sample of households for semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method facilitated the selection of specific household categories and village groups that were in line with the theoretical perspective and research objectives. The project concentrated on four distinct household types: those headed by females, reliant on wage labour, categorized as marginal farmers, and engaged in small-scale farming. These categories were chosen due to their susceptibility to Monga and chronic food insecurity, a vulnerability arising from their impoverished conditions and limited entitlements. Moreover, the selection of participants extended to organizational personnel, specifically targeting Governmental Organizations (GOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) actively engaged in Monga eradication efforts. The sample size for the in-depth interviews was determined according to the parameters outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents of the research

Respondents		Number
Monga affected households	Female-headed Household	2
	Marginal Farmer	2
	Small Farmer	2
	Day labour	1
	Agricultural wage labourer/Part-time fishing	1
	Van puller/fishing/wage labourer (no fixed job)	1
Institutional representatives	UP Chairman	1
	Agriculture Extension Officer	1
	Local NGO Officials	3
	Dhan Bank representative	2
	The Relief and Rehabilitation officer, Nilphamari	1

Source: Adopted from field survey, 2015

The research study conducted a field survey in 2015 to analyse the impact of Monga, a seasonal famine, on various households and institutional representatives. Table 2 categorizes the respondents into two primary groups: Monga-affected households and institutional representatives. Among the nine Monga-affected households, there are two female-headed households, two marginal farmers, two small farmers, one day labourer, one agricultural wage labourer/part-time fisherman, and one van puller/fisher/wage labourer with no fixed job. The institutional representatives include one UP Chairman, one Agriculture Extension Officer, three local NGO officials, two Dhan Bank representatives, and one Relief and Rehabilitation officer from Nilphamari. This diverse respondent pool provides a comprehensive view of the various stakeholders impacted by and involved in addressing the effects of Monga, highlighting the socioeconomic and institutional dynamics at play.

The gathered data underwent analysis using a narrative approach that simultaneously considers both content and form. This approach aims to provide a 'thick description' of the stories shared by respondents, capturing their experiences, intentions, understandings, and motivations related to Monga's vulnerability. Additionally, the project extensively employed grounded theory, utilizing 'codes' and 'constant comparison' techniques to identify themes and patterns within the data. This approach aligns with the focus on the realities of the situation and participants' perspectives. Furthermore, the study incorporated content analysis techniques applied to secondary documents, policy papers, and media reports. This approach involved a meticulous examination of textual materials, enabling a critical analysis that was then correlated with the data gathered during fieldwork. The process involved organizing unbiased information into various knowledge categories.

Monga Affected Households

The study includes a diverse set of respondents from Monga-affected households, totalling 9 individuals. These households are further divided into specific roles, highlighting the varied impact of Monga across different livelihoods:

1. Female-headed Households:

- **Number:** 2
- **Description:** These households, led by women, often face heightened vulnerability due to limited access to resources and support.

2. Marginal Farmers:

- **Number:** 2
- **Description:** Marginal farmers, with minimal land holdings, are particularly susceptible to economic shocks such as Monga.

3. Small Farmers:

- **Number:** 2
- **Description:** Small farmers, though slightly better off than marginal farmers, also face significant risks during Monga periods.

4. Day Labourers:

- **Number:** 1
- **Description:** Individuals relying on daily wage labour face acute instability, with their livelihoods directly threatened by seasonal famines.

5. Agricultural Wage Labourers/Part-time Fishermen:

- **Number:** 1
- **Description:** Those engaged in agricultural wage labour or part-time fishing often have irregular income streams, exacerbating their vulnerability.

6. Van Pullers/Fishers/Wage Labourers (No Fixed Job):

- **Number:** 1
- **Description:** Individuals without fixed jobs face the highest instability, with inconsistent work opportunities and income.

Institutional Representatives

A total of 8 respondents represent various institutions, reflecting the multi-faceted approach to addressing Monga and its impacts:

1. UP Chairman:

- **Number:** 1
- **Description:** The Union Parishad (UP) Chairman plays a crucial role in local governance and disaster management efforts.

2. Agriculture Extension Officer:

- **Number:** 1
- **Description:** This officer provides essential support and information to farmers, aiding in agricultural productivity and resilience.

3. Local NGO Officials:

- **Number:** 3
- **Description:** NGOs are pivotal in providing relief and development assistance, helping communities cope with and recover from Monga.

4. Dhan Bank Representatives:

- **Number:** 2
- **Description:** Representatives from Dhan Bank are involved in financial services, supporting economic stability and access to credit.

5. The Relief and Rehabilitation Officer, Nilphamari:

- **Number:** 1
- **Description:** This officer is integral to coordinating relief and rehabilitation efforts in the Nilphamari region, ensuring effective response to Monga.

The data, sourced from a field survey conducted in 2015, provides a comprehensive view of the various stakeholders affected by and involved in managing the impact of Monga. The diverse composition of respondents highlights the multifaceted nature of the issue and the collaborative efforts required to address it. Table 2 underscores the complex socio-economic landscape of Monga-affected regions. By including both affected households and institutional representatives, the research offers a holistic perspective on the challenges and responses associated with seasonal famine in the surveyed area.

Result and Discussion

Efforts are underway to eradicate Monga in the Northwest region of Bangladesh.

Numerous initiatives have been undertaken to effectively address the challenge of Monga, either directly or indirectly, by enhancing households' adaptive capacities during the off-peak period. Bangladesh shoulders the responsibility of safeguarding citizens' rights to address food insecurity. Additionally, various stakeholders engaged in diverse developmental programs should prioritize food and nutrition within the context of the Monga issue (Zug, 2006). Bangladesh has demonstrated effective management of its food and agricultural policies, particularly in areas such as deregulation, farming exploration and progress, food aid distribution (Chowdhury et al., 2006), and market dynamics, a response stemming from the shadows of the 1970s famine and starvation crisis (Ahmed et al., 2000).

Efforts to eradicate Monga in the Northwest region of Bangladesh are multifaceted, involving a combination of government initiatives, non-governmental organization (NGO) interventions, and community-based strategies. Key ongoing efforts include:

Government Initiatives:

1. **Social Safety Net Programs:** Various programs like the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), and Employment Generation Program for the Poorest (EGPP) provide direct support to Monga-affected populations.
2. **Subsidized Food Distribution:** Schemes like the Open Market Sale (OMS) ensure food availability at reduced prices during critical periods.
3. **Agricultural Development:** Promotion of agricultural diversification and support for cultivating high-yield and Monga-resistant crops, coupled with enhanced extension services, provide farmers with timely information and resources.
4. **Infrastructure Development:** Investments in infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, and rural electrification aim to boost economic activities and reduce vulnerability.

NGO Interventions:

1. **Microfinance Programs:** NGOs like BRAC and Grameen Bank offer microcredit and financial services to empower local communities economically, facilitating the establishment of small businesses and diversification of income sources.
2. **Livelihood Training:** Training in alternative livelihoods such as poultry farming, fisheries, and handicrafts reduces dependence on agriculture.
3. **Disaster Preparedness and Resilience Building:** Programs focusing on disaster preparedness and resilience enhance communities' ability to cope with and recover

from Monga, including community awareness initiatives, early warning systems, and the construction of flood shelters.

Community-Based Strategies:

1. **Community Savings Groups:** The formation of these groups helps households build financial resilience against seasonal economic downturns.
2. **Local Cooperatives:** Promoting cooperative farming and collective marketing efforts ensures better pricing and reduces exploitation by middlemen.
3. **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Community education initiatives raise awareness about Monga and its effects, empowering communities to take proactive measures.

Within this framework, poverty alleviation programs have been implemented as essential interventions to mitigate the repercussions of Monga in the region. While there has been observed reduction in the severity of Monga compared to the past, attributed to a range of governmental, non-governmental, and donor-initiated programs, it's essential to note that previous strategies were not specifically tailored to address this phenomenon (Elahi and Ara, 2008; Hossain, 2005). Khandker and Mahmud (2012) argue that newly implemented policies targeting Monga reduction necessitate constant monitoring to evaluate their effectiveness, serving as a crucial test case.

Programmes Applied in Practice

As previously emphasized, among the various strategies employed to prevent or alleviate the Monga situation in the Rangpur region, many of these strategies lack adequate design to effectively mitigate the impact of Monga. While the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) plays a pivotal role in addressing Monga, a diverse range of national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and stakeholders, including worldwide and bilateral agencies, operate in the northwest region. Despite this, not every NGO is actively committed to combating hunger. In the study area, Monga tends to be secondary to the primary focus of most NGOs, whose agendas predominantly revolve around project-based and demonstrative initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation, food security, and Monga mitigation through social and economic development. These organizations form strategic partnerships with government and donor agency initiatives, as well as multilateral institutions like the World Bank and UNDP, and bilateral agencies such as USAID and DFID. Together, they coordinate and supervise a diverse range of development projects. Multilateral institutions play a crucial role in influencing policy and practice by prioritizing human rights and closely examining national policies. The Local Consultative Group actively participates in agricultural and rural development projects within the Monga-affected areas as part of a comprehensive development effort.

In contrast, the Nutrition Working Group (NWG), under the auspices of UNICEF and Plan International, has been dedicated to promoting the well-being of affected individuals since 2005. Additionally, there has been a surge in philanthropic initiatives driven by individual or collaborative actions. The connectivity between various government authorities and

departments, along with their proposed packages to mitigate the Monga situation, serves to encourage the involvement of NGOs within ongoing policies and strategies to address this predicament. Concurrently, external factors such as grantor preferences and the complex roles of the civil society and state influence social organisations to engage in a variety of development programs in Monga-prone areas (Oven, 2009). However, the programs renowned for combating Monga in the study village, and generally prevalent in other Monga-affected areas, can be broadly categorized into extended and temporary strategies, as concisely outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Monga Combat Programs in the Study Village

Varieties of Reactions	Major programmes
Temporary Response	Social safety net*
	100 Days work
	Open Market Sale (OMS) of subsidised food
	Micro-credit (both consumption and income generation)
Extended Responses	GoB core food security programmes
	PRIME
	Agriculture diversification programmes
	Dhan Bank
	WFP School feeding programme
	Conventional Microfinance programs
	Extended programs driven by NGOs

Source: Field Work, 2015

Temporary Measures

In the previous section, it was established that households primarily recognize government-run Social Safety Nets as the key short-term programs provided by both governmental organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These initiatives are implemented by households to alleviate the negative impact of Monga on their livelihoods and food consumption. While each program possesses distinct objectives, a shared element among them is the reduction of vulnerability during crises. The outcomes of these programs can generally be categorized into three main purposes:

Prevention: Some implemented programs aim to decrease the likelihood of shock occurrences. For instance, the establishment of cluster villages for landless individuals serves as a preventive measure.

Mitigation: Programs focusing on resource development through endowments work to alleviate the hardships caused by shocks. For instance, beneficiaries of Food for Work (FFW) are better equipped to withstand fluctuations in food prices.

Coping: Many individuals facing vulnerability rely on specialized programs to navigate the challenges posed by everyday shocks or to alleviate the negative impacts of situations like Monga. Noteworthy examples of such initiatives include Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and Relief programs.

The 2010 Household Income Economy Survey (HIES) data indicates a heightened focus on addressing Monga in the Rangpur region, possibly leading to increased safety-net coverage. In 2010-11, about 35% of households in Rangpur benefited from at least one safety-net program, a significant rise compared to the national average of 25% (BBS, 2011: 74–75). Notably, instances of multiple program memberships were less common in Rangpur. However, the average monthly benefits per beneficiary household were slightly lower (around 20%) than the national average. While Rangpur lagged behind in programs providing year-round benefits, such as allowances for older adults and destitute women, it boasted higher overall safety-net coverage. This expanded coverage partly resulted from programs offering short-term or one-time benefits, primarily Gratuitous Relief (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). Interestingly, some safety-net programs, not exclusively designated for the Monga period but providing year-round benefits for the impoverished, also contributed to alleviating hunger during Monga.

Apart from direct food or cash transfers, short-term interventions often involved improving food access through open market sales (OMS) of selected items like rice, lentils, and wheat at reduced prices and specific quantities (see photograph 1). Typically, each person could buy up to 5 kg of each item. Food prices usually remained relatively stable during Monga unless disrupted by events like flooding. However, challenges arose from market-related issues, especially during crises caused by food price fluctuations. Currently, no dedicated program addresses shocks arising from market failures, except the Government of Bangladesh's Open Market Sales (OMS) initiative. Despite this, OMS has become immensely popular among the impoverished.



Photograph 1: Government initiated open market sale.

Source: <http://business-and-economy-bd-and-world.blogspot.co.uk>

Another effective short-term program, as reported by both households and stakeholders, is the 100-day work scheme, designed primarily for cash-for-work initiatives during the Monga season. Under this program, a single family member per household is permitted to engage in work for 100 days within a season and receive daily wages. The program

encompasses diverse projects such as canal digging, embankment construction, earth filling, pond clearing, and compost production. These endeavours are executed through this program.

Extended programs

During the fieldwork, it was observed that, aside from the PRIME program, the Dhan bank, and agricultural diversification through Short Duration Varieties (SDRs) and small-scale vegetation, there exist no direct long-term initiatives explicitly designed for Monga eradication. While certain programs are perceived by stakeholders to be interconnected with Monga eradication efforts, it is crucial to recognize that these initiatives operate at the national level and are not specifically designed for the Greater Rangpur region. It is evident that the overarching goals for improving the country's food security aren't inherently suitable for addressing the Monga situation in localized areas.

In 2006, the Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF), a prominent wholesale microfinance institution dedicated to poverty alleviation, introduced a significant microfinance program called the 'Programmed Initiatives for Monga Eradication (PRIME)' with the specific purpose of tackling Monga. PRIME encompasses both short-term and long-term components. Short-term measures include emergency seasonal loans and cash or food in exchange for labor-intensive tasks such as soil or road repair. Long-term strategies focus on creating income-generating activities and microenterprises. Short-term efforts address immediate food shortages and related issues, while long-term steps aim to establish sustainable solutions by generating employment opportunities and diversifying income sources, ultimately reducing vulnerability to Monga (Khalily and Latif, 2010).

Unlike standard microfinance, PRIME provides ultra-poor microcredit and services under flexible terms, including production and consumption loans. The interest rate is around 10 percent, compared to the 20 percent of regular microfinance, and fixed savings are not mandated. Target beneficiaries are identified through a village census based on criteria such as households with less than 50 decimals of land, per capita monthly income not exceeding Tk 1,500, and at least one household member engaged in daily wage labor. PRIME offers year-round services that encompass income-generating activities, skills-based training, remittances, and primary healthcare (Khalily and Latif, 2010). Additionally, during the Monga season, PRIME offers emergency loans for consumption smoothing and cash in exchange for work on local infrastructure projects. PKSF has also introduced a program targeting migrant workers from Monga-affected areas. However, PRIME doesn't provide consumption credit without subsequent or prior production credit (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012). As of June 2011, PRIME has reached 321,633 beneficiaries through 16 Partner Organizations (PKSF Annual Report, 2012).

Since July 2002, the School Feeding Program (SFP), initiated by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Government of Bangladesh (GOB), has been benefiting approximately 1.1 million school students in urban slums of Dhaka city and other chronically food-insecure rural areas. The program provides fortified biscuits containing 300 kilocalories, which meet about 75% of the daily requirements for vitamin A, zinc, folate, and iron. Partner NGOs implement the program under the direct oversight of the WFP regional office. This initiative has led to increased student enrolment, attendance,

attention span, and learning capacity, while simultaneously reducing dropout rates and short-term hunger. Moreover, students' nutritional status and overall health have improved through the provision of essential micronutrients and protein/calorie supplements. The program has also facilitated the installation of arsenic-free tube wells and separate toilet facilities for girls in schools (Rogers et al., 2004).

In September 2011, the Government of Bangladesh launched the National School Feeding Programme (NSFP) in collaboration with the WFP. The WFP is engaged in capacity building with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education to facilitate the expansion and management of this program (BBS, 2012).

During fieldwork, it was evident that prominent NGOs like BRAC, GUK, TMSS, Islamic Relief (IR), and RDRS have comprehensive long-term poverty reduction programs, often involving microcredit, although microcredit's significance in reaching the most impoverished is still underrecognized. BRAC, for instance, initiated the 'Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction (CFPR)' project. Under this scheme, the poorest households receive assets valued between 8,000 and 13,000 TK., along with training and additional support for investment management. These households also receive a daily allowance (around 300 Taka per month) until income is generated from the asset. Furthermore, the program provides legal and subsidized health services, water, and sanitation facilities, and nurtures supportive community networks (Holmes et al., 2008). ASA, another leading NGO, runs an extensive microcredit program, offering loan schemes ranging from TK. 1000 to TK. 3000 for a year, with a monthly interest of 10 percent. In certain cases, they offer interest-free loans. An interesting observation is that despite the claims by NGOs operating both microcredit and social programs that their social initiatives are accessible to all poor individuals, credit and social programs are deeply intertwined. Participants in credit programs are more likely to benefit from social programs, excluding Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) programs (ASA local office of Gangachar Union, 2012).

One innovative strategy for addressing Monga is the community Paddy Bank or 'community Dhan Bank', where Monga-vulnerable poor individuals deposit a certain quantity of paddy (a minimum of 10 kg, based on their capacity) during suitable periods. They then borrow this paddy during the Monga season. Upon returning the paddy, they usually add a predetermined amount of extra paddy, thereby enhancing their own and the Dhan Bank's stock. Several households reported engaging in rice saving, especially after the Aman and Boro harvests. The concept of rice or paddy banks is growing in popularity in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Datt, 2007). Research elsewhere has indicated that Dhan Banks support impoverished households by enabling them to borrow money (at a high-interest rate) from moneylenders and fulfil essential needs while mitigating.

Certain instances of program inefficiencies are evident in the context of Monga eradication

The current approach of the government towards addressing Monga primarily revolves around coping-based methods, particularly safety nets. These programs, designed as risk-reduction measures, offer transfer payments and relief, but it is contended that such

assistance does not foster the creation of sustainable income sources for the impoverished, serving more as a short-term solution than a long-term one (Elahi and Ara, 2008). Many of these initiatives function as temporary poverty-alleviation measures, with some even being halted prematurely due to financial constraints or administrative challenges. For instance, the PRIME program excluded an income-generating component in 2011 due to funding and operational difficulties (PKSF, 2012).

Program coverage displays significant gaps, with most safety net initiatives not giving due emphasis to economic vulnerability, even in the presence of demographic vulnerability (e.g., children, the elderly, disabled, and chronically ill). While some programs target women through special Social Safety Net Programs (SSNP), there is a deficiency in re-evaluating the actual productive roles of rural women and their gradual detachment from productive assets. Neglected areas such as dietary changes, resulting nutritional consequences, health-related shocks, and social violence continue to be absent from existing programs, despite their significance in terms of food and nutrition security (Zohir et al., 2010). Notably, education is addressed within the development sector, but health-related programs remain absent from Social Safety Net/Social Protection programs (ibid).

In the context of income stability, Khandker et al. (2011) argue that the primary issue isn't transient seasonal income fluctuations, but rather the year-round shortfall in income and productivity. As a result, interventions that do not substantially boost income and productivity throughout the year may not be effective in sustainably addressing Monga in the greater Rangpur region. Some programs' efficacies, like Food For Work (FFW), have been called into question, with households reporting subpar quality of rural roads built under the program.

Agricultural development and diversification emerge as a significant focus for long-term Monga alleviation. Agricultural growth is pivotal in increasing food grain availability and generating employment through advanced practices such as Short-Duration Rice (SDR) varieties. However, the adoption of SDR varieties necessitates addressing issues like widespread adaptation, input support, and technological assistance. Holmes et al. (2008:2) highlight that the poorest in Bangladesh face limitations in utilizing agriculture to enhance their livelihoods due to risks associated with investing in new agricultural technologies, vulnerability to shocks, limited access to capital and labor, and inadequate information access. The challenge lies in ensuring that technology adoption extends beyond medium and large farmers to benefit smaller ones.

Despite the recognition of the importance of increased agricultural production, marginalized farmers face obstacles in accessing tertiary and secondary markets, which limits their ability to capitalize on enhanced agricultural productivity. Land reform, though highlighted in policies like the PSRP and PRIME, has seen limited progress. Moreover, the expansion of micro-credit programs, including microfinance, has not substantially alleviated extreme forms of food deprivation during Monga, and disbursement levels show seasonality with reduced lending during the Monga season (Khandker and Mahmud, 2012).

While NGOs play a crucial role in poverty reduction and sustainable development, their impact on overall poverty alleviation efforts in the region remains modest. The potential for external forces to divert NGO programs for poverty reduction away from their intended

impact is a concern. Professionalism replacing the volunteer spirit in NGOs, coupled with misalignment of programs with people's desired change, raises questions about their effectiveness (Newaz, 2003). Furthermore, existing micro-credit programs have limitations, and their impact on extreme poverty during Monga is not substantial (World Bank, Khandker and Mahmud, 2012).

The relationship between micro-credit providers and beneficiaries is characterized by distrust, and the utilization of micro-credit by rural women has mostly trapped them in subsistence and mortality traps. The expansion of micro-credit has reached a plateau, raising questions about its potential for addressing seasonality effectively (Osmani et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the absence of comprehensive long-term solutions for the ultra-poor remains a challenge for NGOs. As the needs of Monga-affected households extend beyond the scope of individual projects, a balance between supporting self-reliance and financing physical structures becomes crucial.

NGOs often fail to plan for long-term volatility at the population level, struggling to cope with ecological changes in their work areas due to the absence of cumulative research in program design. Moreover, variations in disbursement during Monga indicate a lack of opportunities for income-generating activities during that period. This contributes to a sense of distrust between providers and beneficiaries. The result is that while NGO programs may yield improvements in living conditions, their efficacy in achieving long-term sustainable solutions is limited. This is particularly evident in cases where the programs do not adapt to households' immediate changing social circumstances.

The prevailing strategies to combat Monga largely possess a temporary nature, lacking a focus on long-term sustainability. Issues related to sustainability, impact on extreme poverty, micro-credit effectiveness, and program adaptation call for a revaluation of existing approaches and a more comprehensive strategy for addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by Monga.

Policy Implications

This study has contributed valuable insights into the current landscape of Monga vulnerability within households from a village-level perspective. It becomes evident from the previous discussion that while various actors have initiated programs to combat Monga within the policy framework and under targeted initiatives, progress has often been gradual. This phenomenon can be likened to what Warwick (1979) previously termed as an 'object with no velocity,' echoing the sentiment shared by some households that Monga persists albeit with diminished effects. Thus, the empirical findings underscore a series of generalizations that carry significant policy implications.

This study contends that the potential for successful interventions lies in their efficacy within real-life contexts, by forging links between desirability and feasibility and aligning economic rationality with political practicability (Field, 1993). Furthermore, Longhurst (1986) asserts the importance of addressing seasonal phenomena and their interconnectedness, proposing that seasonal hunger could be mitigated by assisting people in spreading or reducing risks, as well as fortifying existing buffers to counteract its severe consequences. This approach could foster a 'season-proof' development policy, averting

the risk of relegating seasonality to an intriguing yet insurmountable phenomenon. In a similar vein, Crawshaw (1991) highlights that elevating individuals beyond the seasonal threshold can alleviate constraints and encourage self-sustaining growth.

Considering these considerations, this study advocates recognizing and embedding the significance of Monga syndromes within a new, context-specific policy framework, integrating it within the prevailing national policy guidelines. Given that the roots of Monga's challenges span from macroeconomic policy inadequacies to local political structures, addressing it necessitates both structural and operational interventions at various levels – local, regional, and national (Elahi and Ara, 2008; Hossain, 2005). Khandker and Mahmud (2012) propose a three-pronged approach in this context: (a) merging seasonally oriented policies with those targeting structural causes of enduring poverty, (b) reducing income seasonality through agricultural diversification and enhancing the poor households' capacity to manage seasonality, and (c) assisting impoverished households in coping with seasonal hunger to prevent extreme coping mechanisms during distress.

Given that widespread joblessness during specific periods characterizes Monga-prone areas, coupled with the prevalence of poverty-level wages in the existing job market, the most effective way to alleviate hunger is by empowering individuals to earn more stable and higher incomes while accumulating assets (World Bank, 1986). This underscores the need for a dedicated regional development plan for Monga-prone regions, fostering non-agricultural business growth, rural non-farm economy diversification, job creation, and upward pressure on rural wages.

It is imperative to encompass three fundamental aspects of livelihoods in this approach: provisioning (ensuring food and minimum nutritional requirements, including essential needs), protection (safeguarding households' productive assets), and promotion (enhancing households' resilience for sustainable food and basic needs fulfilment). Alongside job creation, recent initiatives in the agricultural sector (e.g., cultivation of Short-Duration Rice varieties), targeted interventions (e.g., PRIME), and community-driven efforts (e.g., Dhan Bank, Samittee for cash savings) have yielded positive outcomes in reducing Monga's impact and should be further reinforced.

Achieving a sustainable solution for Monga in the Rangpur region necessitates striking a balance between long-term and short-term strategies. Immediate hardships can be alleviated through short-term measures, while the outcomes of such endeavours can have long-lasting effects on promoting sustainable livelihoods. Incorporating seasonal poverty dimensions, including food deficiency, into official poverty statistics can yield more effective results. Building an efficient database of affected households and their socio-economic conditions would enhance targeted interventions. Given the challenges of implementation weaknesses such as corruption, bribery in VGD card distribution, and beneficiary targeting inefficiencies, strict accountability is paramount. A robust monitoring system is also essential to track changing situations, assess intervention achievements and sustainability, and trigger necessary follow-up actions.

Furthermore, the threat of climate change poses an additional burden to Monga-prone areas already susceptible to frequent natural disasters. Climate change has the potential to exacerbate Monga vulnerability across various dimensions of food security. Consequently,

any Monga mitigation strategy should encompass robust policies addressing future environmental challenges and integrating climate change adaptation plans.

Additionally, experiences from NGOs operating in the studied areas suggest that successful group mobilization and empowerment efforts require specific criteria regardless of political considerations. This includes a willingness to experiment, adaptability, sustained program support, and precise participant targeting. These considerations may lead to pivotal actions promoting pro-poor innovation through social and economic entrepreneurship in Monga-prone areas. However, a shift in policy orientation from prominent NGOs and government-linked administrations, along with relevant financial institutions operating in the northwest region, is necessary. Ultimately, a gradual transition from food security to food sovereignty is warranted.

Conclusion

In the quest to mitigate the repercussions of Monga, a series of poverty alleviation programs have been deployed as a bulwark against this famine-like scenario. However, within this array of initiatives, it becomes apparent that short-term measures are insufficient for effectively tackling the challenges posed by Monga, primarily due to the pervasive poverty and endemic food insecurity prevailing in the Rangpur region. On the contrary, the long-term strategies envisioned within Bangladesh's Monga policy have encountered limitations concerning the dissemination of knowledge and the transfer of skills among diverse stakeholders, as well as the broader application of insights gained. Despite concerted efforts aimed at alleviating this famine-like scenario, the outcomes of these programs often fall short of providing comprehensive solutions (Zug, 2006).

Scholarly inquiries conducted elsewhere have shed light on the violation of fundamental human rights during the Monga situation, often rooted in political agendas and social exclusion. Mahmud (2007) underscores the political dimensions of this issue, emphasizing its foundation in power dynamics. In a more recent context, the Government of Bangladesh's policy titled 'Accelerating Growth and Reducing Poverty,' embedded within the Sixth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), recognizes the Monga challenge as a litmus test for effective strategies against seasonal hunger. The prevailing neoliberal trajectory of both the state and society has shaped macroeconomic policies that, in turn, influence micro-level political economy choices. These choices have reshaped the coping mechanisms and living conditions of the Monga-affected poor, either individually or through synergistic interactions. Moreover, the intricate interplay among various institutions within the Monga policy landscape holds the potential to alleviate food insecurity in the Rangpur region, offering insights that can be extrapolated to broader contexts within Bangladesh.

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