

Report from the Special DER Meeting on ‘Monga’ 2004

1000-1300 hrs on Wednesday, 10 November 2004

17th Floor, UN Meeting Room, IDB Bhaban

1. Definition of ‘Monga’

Monga is seasonal scarcity of employment and hence household incomes leading to lack of access to food amongst mainly rural poor landless families. It occurs almost every year mostly in the northwestern districts, west of the Brahmaputra, particularly after the planting but before the aman harvest in the months of September, October, and November. The phenomenon of lack of options for income generation at this time of year in North Bengal was noted as long ago as the colonial period but has only been reported prominently in the media in recent years.

‘Monga’ is not itself the cause of the problems, but the word used to describe the impact at household level of a combination of factors such as the reduction in day-labour opportunities after the rice crop is sown and before the harvest, seasonal higher prices of basic food commodities, and the after-effects of monsoon flooding.

Although a structural issue to be addressed by government and development partners through appropriate mechanisms, the DER Sub-Group is concerned with the issue because of its impact upon vulnerable populations whose coping capacity has already been stressed by the floods. The DER Sub-Group’s role is to improve the humanitarian response to the needs through better information and coordination.

2. Description of the effect of ‘Monga’ on households

Indicators for the presence of ‘monga’ are the typical responses of households to it, which are likely to be amongst the following:

- a) Reduction in the size and number of meals prepared and consumed each day;
- b) Recourse to the consumption of uncultivated foods from wild sources;
- c) Very low wage rates for day-labour (it is now as low as Tk. 30 /day in the NW);
- d) Advance sale of labour (at a discount on the prevailing market rate);
- e) Sale of fixed and moveable household assets, such as some land, livestock, jewellery, furniture, even pots and pans;
- f) Migration (especially of men) to other, less affected rural areas, or to major cities;
- g) Taking advantage of repayment holidays on existing loans; and
- h) Contracting news loans, from micro-credit providers if possible, otherwise from village moneylenders at extremely high interest rates.

All these indicators could be verified only through field visits and discussions with the affected people themselves.

3. Likely duration and future evolution of problems caused by ‘Monga’ this year

The immediate impact of the ‘monga’ is on unemployment rates, then on household incomes, then on their food security, and finally on their nutrition levels. Malnutrition will first evidence itself in a rise in malnutrition-related diseases, such as diarrhoea, and finally in increased deathrates. Women and women-headed households will suffer worse because they already tend to be more malnourished, partly for existing socio-cultural reasons, and because when there is an oversupply of day-labour, employers will tend to hire men before women.

There is no doubt that the series of major flood episodes from July to October this year have exacerbated the impact of the ‘monga’. Normally the ‘monga’ is over by late November and in areas where the aman crop is ready for harvest and likely to provide a decent yield, the employment and thus household food security situation will gradually improve from now. Harvesting has already started in some parts of Nilphamari and Rangpur Districts.

However, because of the floods, the overall size of this crop and hence the amount of day-labour required is expected to be significantly reduced. In some areas the ‘monga’ situation may persist beyond November until the coldest time of the year, and it may only end with the increase in employment at the time of planting the boro rice crop, in January.

4. Identification of affected *upazila* in the Districts of:

District Name	Names of Severely Affected <i>Upazila</i>	Names of Moderately Affected <i>Upazila</i>	Names of Unaffected <i>Upazila</i>
KURIGRAM	Chilmari	Bhurungamari	
	Rajibpur	Kurigram Sadar	
	Raomari	Nageshwari	
	Ulipur	Rajarhat	
		Phulbari	
LALMONIRHAT	Aditmari	Lalmonirhat Sadar	
	Hatibandha	Patgram	
	Kaliganj		
NILPHAMARI	Dimla	Domar	
	Jaldhaka	Nilphamari Sadar	
	Kishoreganj	Saidpur	
RANGPUR	Badarganj	Mithapukur	
	Gangachhara	Pirganj	
	Kaunia	Rangpur Sadar	
	Pirgacha	Taraganj	
GAIBANDHA	Gaibandha Sadar	Gobindaganj	
	Phulchhari	Palashbari	
	Sughatta	Sadullapur	
	Sundarganj		

5. Estimation of the assistance needed in these districts, sector by sector

SECTOR /	Kurigram	Lalmonirhat	Nilphamari	Rangpur	Gaibandha	Remarks
Type of assistance	Amount of assistance required for each district (above)					
HEALTH & NUTRITION						
1. ORS	WHO reports that Civil Surgeons do not report any lack of stocks of these basic drugs at district level, however there may be some political pressure to hold back the supplies needed at <i>upazila</i> and <i>union parishad</i> levels. The main thing is to ensure that they are available at all levels as soon as there is a rise in incidence of diarrhoea and skin diseases, which is always possible when people are forced to consume unsuitable plants as food.					Recommend monitoring the supply situation to ensure drug availability when needed
2. IVS						
3. Basic medications (e.g. for scabies)						
4. Blended food						
FOOD RELIEF						
1. Food relief for female-headed HH	For all female-headed households and other vulnerable families (e.g. the elderly) who will not be able to secure any day-labouring work even though the lean season will be over.					At least at the level of the 30 kg VGR
WAGE EMPLOYMENT (Food for Work, Cash for Work)						
1. Food for Work (FFW)	In all affected districts					Feeder road repair, home-stead raising, sanitary latrines set up
2. Cash for Work (CFW)						

6. Consolidation of which agency has provided what type and amount of assistance, and where, to respond to the 'monga' situation so far:

SECTOR /	Kurigram	Lalmonirhat	Nilphamari	Rangpur	Gaibandha	Remarks
Assistance Type	Amount of assistance required for each district (above)					
BRAC						
1. Rice and Pulse	18,587 families	19,930 families	23,769 families	5,472 families	22,242 families	@ 5 kg. of rice mixed with .5 kg. of pulses/family
Concern						
1. CFW (80 Tk./day for 45 days work on roads)	500 families			100 families	500 families	Equivalent to 3,600 Tk. per family over ~2 months

2. Agriculture Seeds	600 families				1,100 families	1 veg. pkt & 15 kg wheat seed/family
GK						
1. Food relief basket	1,000 families				2,000 families	@ 15 kg rice, 3.7 kg pulse, 3 kg potato, 0.5 l oil, 0.375 kg salt
GUK						
1. Rice (20 kg./family)					5,000 families	100 MT in total
2. Pulse (2 kg./family)					5,000 families	10 MT in total
3. Salt (1 kg./family)					5,000 families	5 MT in total
4. Edible Oil (1 Litre/family)					5,000 families	5,000 metric litres in total
Islamic Relief						
1. Ramadan Food Support Programme		1,500 families	1,500 families	2,000 families		@ 10 kg rice, 2 kg pulse, 1 l oil, 1 kg sugar
NIRAPAD						
1. Food Assistance					5 families	@ 2 weeks of rice and pulse
2. Support for IGAs					28 families	Total Tk. 30 – 50,000
Oxfam (assistance supplied in Sep, Oct and Nov 04)						
1. Food and non-food aid items	5,060 families				8,000 families	@ 15 kg rice, 3.75 kg pulse, 1 kg salt, 1.5 l oil, 1.35 kg HEB, 2 sanitary napkins @ 32 kg rice, 4 kg pulse, 2 kg salt, 2 l oil, soap, clothes, mosquito nets
2. Fodder for livestock	1,000 families					@ 30 kg per household

3. Vegetable seeds	3,000 families					@ 200 gr. per decimal land owned by the household
RDRS						
1. 'Monga' specific relief	580 families					@ 7 kg rice, 0.5 kg pulse, 125 gr. salt
2. Blankets (x 5,000)						To distribute by end-Dec
3. CFW	400 families					Homestead-raising
Government (Ministry of Food & Disaster Management)						
1. VGF of 10 kg /family/month	188,000 families	110,500 families	160,500 families	215,500 families	213,000 families	No. of cards decided Sep
2. Gratuitous Relief (5-10 kg per family)	1,150 MT (~ 150,000 families)	500 MT (~ 70,000 families)	100 MT (~ 15,000 families)	350 MT (~ 50,000 families)	1,200 MT (~ 160,000 families)	3,300 MT in total
3. Gratuitous Relief (cash)	Tk. 1,000,000 (~ 2,000 families)	Tk. 550,000 (~ 1,100 families)	Tk. 150,000 (~ 300 families)	Tk. 400,000 (~ 800 families)	Tk. 1,000,000 (~ 2,000 families)	Tk. 500 per family
4. Test Relief	848 MT	549 MT	762 MT	871 MT	1,068 MT	
5. FFW	687 MT	417 MT	522 MT	950 MT	889 MT	
WFP						
1. VGR of 30 kg /family/1 month only	188,000 families in Nov only	110,500 families in Nov only	Not supported by VGR	Not supported by VGR	213,000 families in Nov only	HHs with VGF cards to receive VGR for 1 month

7. Summary of the main conclusions of the DER Group about:

- The impact of the 'monga':

There seems little doubt that the 'monga' this year is having an adverse affect on the rural poor of the five northwestern districts. However, it is difficult to measure the actual extent of the problem at household level without extensive field visits. RDRS, which is present and directly implementing programmes in Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari, reports that there is no significant change in the loan recovery rates from its 300,000 members.

- Comparison with the situation in previous years:

The ‘monga’ this year is proving to be harsher than it has been over the last several years, at least since the 1998 flood. Due to the great extent of flooding this year, significant loss of land due to river erosion, coverage of fields in infertile sand, and the unusually heavy rainfall in September, about 80% of standing crops were damaged or destroyed in the ‘monga’ affected districts.

At the same time, damage to and loss of the vegetable crops has raised vegetable prices putting them out of reach to the rural poor.

Moreover, as the water remained standing over large tracts of agricultural land, aman paddy was planted late and the yield is likely to be significantly reduced. The diminished yield will result in a smaller harvest that will therefore produce fewer opportunities for day-labourers. The greater than usual loss of crops and employment opportunities this year means that the recovery period for affected poor families from ‘monga’ will be longer than normal.

– Household coping capacity:

The main options for coping with the ‘monga’ are reducing food intake at the risk of increasing their malnutrition and either selling assets or taking on an increased debt-load.

Advance labour sales and migration are not really available options for the same reason, because the floods have severely reduced day-labouring opportunities in both the ‘monga’-affected districts and also in those to which people would normally migrate (i.e. the Northeast ‘haor’ areas).

– Response actions:

The vast majority of the response has been by the Government, through its various relief programmes (VGF, Gratuitous Relief, Test Relief) for the floods. Nevertheless, the Government has only been able to meet a limited proportion of the needs. The 10 kg VGF and GR rations have been spread widely but thinly and should be seen only as a supplement to the household food basket – 60 gr. of rice alone per day cannot keep a person alive for a month. The only option to scale up the Government assistance in these areas is for them to be picked up under the WFP VGR programme, which provides 30 kg to the same cardholders for 1 month. This is happening for the districts of Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha, but not for Nilphamari and Rangpur that were not impacted by the floods.

Other forms of safety net in these districts is the ongoing flood relief and rehabilitation work by NGOs such as BRAC, CARE, Concern, GUK, Oxfam, and RDRS which are not a response to the ‘monga’ as such, but the flood-affected population represents those who are suffering worst from ‘monga’ in these areas. A number of agencies have now commenced Cash-for-Work (CFW) schemes, in addition to regular programmes such as WFP’s Integrated Food Security (IFS) which targets 163,000 ultra-poor households and the School Feeding programme which provides high-energy nutritionally fortified biscuits (HEB) to 600,000 children in this region every school-day.

– Areas of concern:

Households are already burdened with a high level of loans. The ‘monga’ has contributed to a vicious cycle of increasing indebtedness and poverty because, even though the shortage of labouring and the high prices of food will end, many people

will be worse off for a long time to come. They will endure its hardships, but at the cost of more migration to the cities, increased levels of malnutrition, selling their productive household assets, and an unsupportable burden of debt.

8. Recommendations for action (by DER Group Members or others):

- Short-term (i.e. redirection of assistance, within the next 1-2 weeks):

Assistance in response to ‘monga’ should be provided only to those below a certain income level – it must be targeted at the truly ultra-poor. The DER Sub-Group could assist by agreeing and promoting a standard definition of a ‘monga-affected household’.

WFP could consider utilising High-Energy Biscuits (HEB) from the contingency reserve in its country programme, to provide relief to households in Gaibandha, Nilphamari and Rangpur (areas not covered by the regular WFP Nutrition For Education programme, to avoid mixing the two sources and uses of HEB).

- Medium-term (within the next 1-2 months):

In the medium term the situation in these districts is expected to improve somewhat as agricultural labouring picks up for the aman harvest, although as planting was delayed and the crop was damaged by the floods, this is not likely to be as good as in normal years. Ongoing NGO assistance for flood rehabilitation such as FFW and CFW projects to repair feeder roads and houses and to raise homestead will also help to support families through the period.

- Long-term (i.e. to reduce ‘monga’ in future seasons):

It is clear that ‘monga’ is a seasonal phenomenon occurring regularly every year and, as such, it requires a longer-term development approach to overcome it. Suggestions include:

- NGOs should increase the provision of small quantities of vegetable seeds for homestead gardening amongst large numbers of likely ‘monga’ victims during August and September each year.
- Capacity-building of vulnerable families through appropriate skills development leading up to the ‘monga’ season.
- Prior to the ‘monga’ season, the Government should institute Open Market Sales (OMS) to forestall commodity price rises before they occur.
- Government VGF, Gratuitous and Test Relief programmes should be scaled up in terms of numbers of beneficiaries and amounts of assistance during the ‘monga’ months, and Government and NGOs should plan for their FFW and CFW projects on embankment and roads to take place at this time.
- The Government through the PKSF should promote the institution of short-term ‘interest payment holidays’ by debtors to the NGOs in badly ‘monga’ affected areas. It should also expand the availability of micro-finance in order to reduce the scope for village moneylenders.
- The Government should attempt to restrict or regulate the activities of village moneylenders, or at least to control the rates of interest they charge.
- Carry out research into the ‘monga’ phenomenon, and particularly on coping strategies, with a view to the creation of an monitoring system to measure the

severity of the ‘monga’. Additional research should look into the possibilities for crop diversification in the region.

- The Government should set up a specific regional development plan for the areas affected by ‘monga’ to promote the development of non-agricultural businesses and employment possibilities there.
- The acuteness of the problem re-emphasises the urgent need for the implementation of the Bangladesh National Nutrition Programme.

– Other recommendations:

The DER Sub-Group, in spite of its members’ wide coverage of Bangladesh collectively, lacks the ability to produce information that will give an overview of the situation across the whole country or large parts of it, that is not ultimately dependant on the Government data collection and consolidation systems at union, *upazila* and district level. The challenge is to design ways to combine the data the NGOs members have got, in ways that will enable valid conclusions to be drawn and decisions taken collectively. The NGOs need to be encouraged to collect and share data of value to the whole relief operation rather than just to support their own narrow planning requirements.

DER Sub-Group Secretariat

25 November 2004

ANNEXES

A Attendance List

REPORTS SUBMITTED TO THE MEETING (not attached)

1. Concern
2. GUK
3. Helen Keller International
4. WFP Rangpur Regional Office

Annex A

MEETING ATTENDANCE LIST

Serial	Name	Organisation
1	Mr. Ashutosh Dey	Concern
2	Mr. A.K.M. Musha	Concern
3	Mr. Sameer Abd al-Wahid	IIRD
4	Mr. Iftekhar A. Chowdhury	Islamic Relief
5	Mr. Palash Mondal	NIRAPAD [CARE]
6	Mr. Anthony D' Cruze	RDRS
7	Mr. Maksudur Rahman	World Vision
8	Ms. Atia Khatun	GoB [DRR]
9	Mr. Md. Abul Kalam Azad	GoB [DRR]
10	Mr. A. K. Masood Ahmed	UNICEF
11	Ms. Joyce Mormit Das	World Bank
12	Mr. Charlie Higgins	WFP [DER Secretariat]
13	Ms. Rehana Banoo	WFP [DER Secretariat]
14	Ms. Mariko Hattori	WFP [DER Secretariat]
15	Ms. Nazria Islam	WFP [DER Secretariat]