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Chronic Poverty Research Centre

THE DYNAMICS OF POVERTY IN RURAL BANGLADESH

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Perceptions of the Causes and Cures

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This brief summarizes key findings from part one of a three-part quantitative and qualitative research study into the dynamics of poverty, which was collaboratively undertaken by researchers of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, the International Food Policy Research Institute, and Data Analysis and Technical Assistance, Ltd. Part one of the study, which resurveyed villages that had participated in evaluations of anti-poverty interventions in the 1990s and 2000, involved 116 focus group discussions in 11 districts of Bangladesh in mid-2006. The central purpose of these discussions, undertaken in about a quarter of the surveyed villages, was to inform subsequent phases of research by exploring perceptions—particularly of the chronically poor—about the underlying causes of deterioration and improvement in the well-being of people in their communities.

PERCEPTIONS OF DRIVERS OF LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

Causes of Decline

The three most-commonly cited causes of declining circumstances were dowry payments; illness, including injury; and too few income-earning members in households, each of which was rated among the top three causes of decline by more than half the focus groups on average (Table 1). Other factors causing declining circumstances were cited as floods, lack of work/idleness, debt, the rising cost of living, lack of land, business losses, and failed attempts at labor migration. It is interesting to note, however, that a relatively small number of categories—dowry, illness, dependency ratios, flooding, lack of work, and debt—account for much of the decline discussed by the groups. Poor-female groups identified dowry and illness as key causes of decline more than nonpoor male groups, who seemed to be more concerned with family size; nonpoor male groups emphasized idleness more than the other groups; and poor-male groups were more concerned about lack of work, debt, and business losses. These observed differences illustrate the importance of gender and poverty status in studies of the perceived causes of poverty.

Table 1. The most important causes of decline cited by focus group discussants

Cause of decline	Share of all groups (%)
Dowry	50
Illness and injury[a]	48
Family size and dependency ratio	45
Flooding	25
Lack of work	22
Debt	22
Increased prices of essentials	14
Idleness	10
Crop damage	10
Lack of land	9
Business loss	9
Migration	7
Lack of education	5
Court cases	5
Theft and cheating	4
Gambling	4
Death of family member	4
Lack of irrigation	4
Poor roads	3
Old age	3
Division of family property	3
Polygamy	2
River erosion	2
Death of livestock	2
Abandonment	1
Cost of education	1
Drugs and alcohol	1
Poor planning and/or management	1
Low prices of agricultural produce	1
Poor soil	1

Source: Davis, Peter, *Discussions among the Poor: Exploring Poverty Dynamics with Focus Groups in Bangladesh*, CPRC Working Paper No. 84, 2007.

[a] Of these, injuries were explicitly mentioned in five groups.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Since most poverty studies in Bangladesh are exclusively quantitative, and a smaller number exclusively qualitative, it is hoped that this kind of integrated study will provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex social realities and drivers of change that underlie observed aggregate trends in poverty. In each of 29 sites across 11 districts in rural Bangladesh—which together span the range of rural living conditions—four focus group discussions were carried out, separately targeting poor and better-off groups of women and men. The process facilitated open brainstorming followed by consensus-building, such that the three most-important causes for the decline, improvement, or stagnation of people's circumstances were chosen collectively by each group.

Causes of Improvement

The most commonly cited pathways to improved life circumstances were identified as business activities, improved agriculture, access to microcredit, and salaried work (Table 2). Other sources of improvement included successful labor migration, having sons and daughters who were working, rearing livestock, fishing and fish farming, and education and training. These activities were seen as paying off gradually, and as involving hard work and in many cases an element of risk. Many poor people invest their hopes for life improvement in their children, particularly their sons. The receipt of dowry appeared in only three groups as an important cause of improvement, which sharply contrasts the perception that dowries are the most important cause of decline for poor families with girls. Scope exists to support the various strategies people use to improve their lives, especially in terms of reducing the risks associated with business, migration, and improved agriculture.

Table 2. The most important causes of improvement cited by focus group discussants

Cause of improvement	Share of all groups (%)
Business	58
Improved agriculture	41
Loans	40
Salaried work	39
Labor migration	26
Sons and daughters working	25
Day labor and hard work	24
Rearing livestock	16
Fishing and fish farming	14
Education and training	3
Irrigation	3
Receiving dowry	3
Women's employment	2

Source: Davis, Peter, *Discussions among the Poor: Exploring Poverty Dynamics with Focus Groups in Bangladesh*, CPRC Working Paper No. 84, 2007.

Causes of Stagnation

While this category overlapped somewhat with discussions of declining life circumstances, the ranking of reasons for remaining in poverty was different. In particular, dowry and illness do not feature as strongly, probably because they tend to be seen as idiosyncratic problems rather than chronic or structural constraints. Consequently, the predominant causes of chronic poverty were cited as adverse dependency ratios, lack of land, low income, and lack of employment.

THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S WORK

Bangladesh is a country with a long history of gender discrimination. Many anti-poverty interventions thus aim to redress gender imbalances by targeting resources to women. These interventions were seen to provide an opportunity to move out of poverty by many focus groups. In rural areas, however, women are still very poorly remunerated compared with men, and opportunities are often limited to work around homesteads. Even though women's work may not feature as strongly as other causes of upward mobility, it is still a vitally important coping strategy for many very poor families, often functioning as a safety net in times of crisis.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The patterns and causes of decline discussed in focus groups help to reveal the profile of risk facing poor people in rural Bangladesh. Discussions suggest that the poorest people are likely to be most affected by the common causes of decline identified. These people are more vulnerable and less resilient in the face of negative pressures. Nevertheless, clear opportunities for improvement exist through business activities, improved agriculture, microfinance loans, salaried work, and labor migration (the last two often involving adult sons and daughters). Changes for the better were thought to nearly always be gradual and result from hard work with an element of risk—a factor that is heightened for people with few economic and social assets. Public action should therefore take into account the changing profile of risks facing poor people, as well as the sets of opportunities they can realistically pursue.

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