



Seasonal demand for labour on island chars and its effect on migration and remittances

Background

The second phase of the Chars Livelihoods Programme or CLP-2 (2010-2016), aims to improve the livelihoods, incomes and food security of up to one million extremely poor people living on island chars in the north west of Bangladesh.

67,000 extreme poor households meeting the CLP's selection criteria will receive an integrated package of support comprising a grant of Tk 16,000 to purchase an income generating asset of their choice, stipends, livelihoods and social development training, access to a raised plinth, water and sanitation. They also receive access to the CLP's health project.

In an attempt to alleviate *monga*¹, the CLP continues to implement the infrastructure employment project (IEP). This is a cash for work project that aims to provide income earning opportunities for poor households at a time when there are limited local employment opportunities.

The Programme Memorandum for CLP-2 states "the CLP would provide 5.9 million person days of seasonal employment benefiting 0.5 million participants." Seasonal employment is offered for plinth raising activities only.

During the first year of IEP (2010/11) the CLP observed that:

- Many core participant households (CPHHs) were already on raised plinths (during CLP-1) therefore reducing the number of days on offer through plinth raising;
- On chars where land is fertile (e.g. Teesta river) crops are cultivated year-round leaving little or no area for collecting earth or sand for plinth-raising;
- The high water table particularly along the Teesta river limits the depth of pits and hence quantity of earth

¹ *Monga* is seasonal food insecurity in ecologically vulnerable and economically weak parts of north-western Bangladesh, primarily caused by an employment and income deficit before *aman* is harvested. It mainly affects those rural poor who have an undiversified income that is directly or indirectly based on agriculture. The definition of *monga* is restricted to the lean season preceding the *aman* harvest between mid September and mid November although there is a second lean season before *boro* is harvested (mid March to mid April). As this lean season is less severe it is termed *little monga*.

for plinth raising. Land owners are also reluctant to give up fertile soil for plinths;

- The CLP also noted lower labour demand for plinth work during the last season.

After the first year of IEP the CLP concluded the target of 6 million person days of IEP through plinth raising may not be realistic or achievable and flagged these issues at the first CLP-2 annual review (March 2011).

The review team recommended:

"the CLP should investigate the *monga* issue and need for labour alternatives to better understand seasonal labour patterns and how these vary across districts. If the study demonstrates continued need for labour alternatives during *monga*, CLP should investigate the potential of other non-plinth cash for work opportunities, e.g. access roads, fish ponds, forestation etc. On the other hand, if the study on *monga* finds that there are more labour opportunities for chars households than the logframe (LF) needs to be revised."²

The Innovation, Monitoring and Learning Division therefore conducted research to answer the following questions:

- Is there a demand for cash for work /IEP during *monga*?
- If there is a demand for cash for work /IEP then what other non-plinth raising alternatives should be considered?
- what are the inter-district and intra-community impacts of *monga*, especially in terms of work availability and demand for IEP

Key Findings

- *Monga* still exists and affects poorer households disproportionately as they rely on agricultural day labour;
- The effect of *monga* and subsequent demand for IEP appears to be stronger in the Northern districts;
- Poorer households migrate in search of work when local labour is unavailable. The poorest households are sometimes unable to migrate e.g. if they are female headed, if they are chronically sick etc;
- The LF target of 6 million person days of IEP is unrealistic and needs to be revised downwards;
- The IEP safety net is extremely important for households unable to migrate in search of labour during lean periods;
- The CLP should continue to lobby GoB and other organisations to offer cash for work schemes on the chars during *monga* once the CLP leaves a village (a role for the CLP's Partnerships' Division);
- The CLP should consider prioritising the North, where fewer employment opportunities exist outside agriculture, and differences between the richest and poorest are smaller.

² Premchander S, et al; CLP-2; Annual Review 2011; March 2011



Chars Livelihoods Programme

Reducing Extreme Poverty on the Riverine Islands of North West Bangladesh

Methodology

Research was conducted between June and August 2011 in 21 island *char* villages across 7 Districts³. Villages were selected where the CLP had not previously worked. A mix of quantitative and qualitative data was collected using researchers from an independently outsourced company.

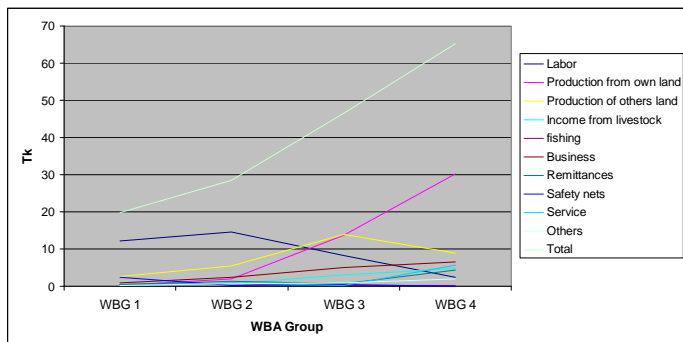
A range of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools were used including social mapping, wellbeing analysis and seasonal calendars. During the wellbeing analysis, villagers were asked to classify families into four different groups/categories (referred to as wellbeing groups [WBG]), based on criteria set by themselves. WBG 1 is the poorest, and WBG 4 the least poor.

A seasonal calendar was conducted in each village to collect information on cropping patterns & associated labour demands. Smaller group discussions were then held with each of the WBGs in all villages. Seasonal calendars were then produced for each WBG in all villages to show 1) general work availability by season, and 2) periods of migration and remittance. Questions were also asked about coping mechanisms during periods of limited work availability, periods of migration and remittance and preferred options for reducing the effects of *monga*.

The reliance on agricultural day labour

Figure 1 illustrates the importance of agricultural labour as a source of income particularly for the poorer households (WBGs 1 and 2). This is supported by baseline data for CLP-2's second cohort of houses which show that 75% of male adults and 4% of female adults are involved in agricultural day labour⁴.

Figure 1: Sources of household income by WBG



A fall in the demand for and/ or ability to supply labour can therefore have a significant impact on households reliant

³ Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur, Pabna, Tangail, Kurigram and Jamalpur

⁴ Mascie-Taylor, N.; Socio-economic characteristics and nutritional status of cohort 2.2 (first tier); report of the baseline survey conducted in October/November 2010; January 2011

on selling their labour and can very quickly determine whether a household is above or below the rural Rajshahi extreme poverty line of Tk 19 per person per day (pppd in 2009/10 prices)⁵.

Seasonality, local cropping patterns, weather conditions etc. all have a bearing on the demand for local agricultural labour, the principal employer on the *chars*. However, even if work is locally available some households may not be able to take full advantage, for example households with disabled or chronically ill active members, or female headed households who care for young children.

Seasonality and its effect on local demand for agricultural labour

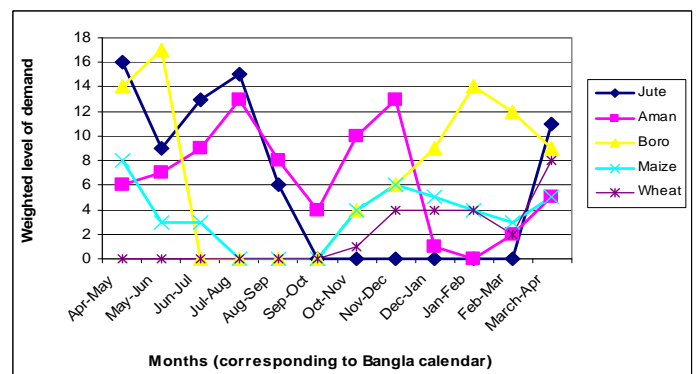
There are naturally district variations in cropping patterns, but the research has shown that the five most widespread crops (in terms of number of villages growing the crop) cultivated include:

- Jute
- Rice (Aman and Boro)
- Maize
- Wheat

Hired labour is generally engaged for land preparation, transplanting, harvesting, and threshing. Irrigation, weeding, applying fertiliser and pesticides are activities generally undertaken by the land owner/ share cropper including their family members.

Figure 2 illustrates that the demand for local labour is very low between the first half of September and first half of November. There is some demand for labour during November and this is associated with the maize and early maturing Aman rice crops. It should be emphasised that the labour demand for maize is limited geographically, mainly to Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat.

Figure 2: Demand for labour by month (5 major crops)⁶



⁵ Jackson, A. (2009) DfID Bangladesh Information Note: Poverty Thresholds and Reporting

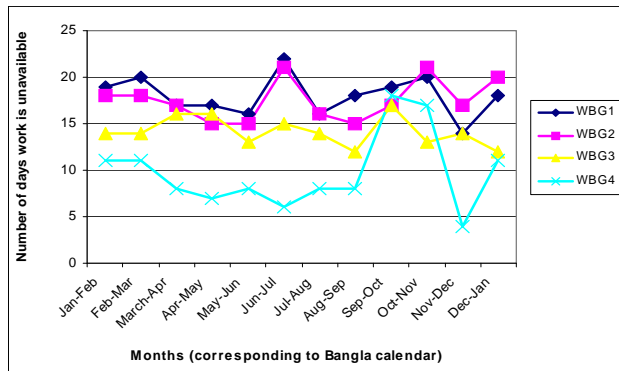
⁶ Data collected in 21 villages. If crop cultivated then questions asked about the associated demand for labour. If 'high' demand then score of 3, if 'medium' then a score of 2, if 'low' then a score of 1. Maximum score per crop is 21.



Chars Livelihoods Programme

Reducing Extreme Poverty on the Riverine Islands of North West Bangladesh

Figure 3: Availability of local employment opportunities by wellbeing group and month



WBGs 1 and 2 are particularly involved in selling their labour and are therefore the most affected by a fall in demand for agricultural labour. This is illustrated in figure 3 which shows the number of days without work by WBG and month (on average). On average, WBGs 1 and 2 suffer the most (59% of the time they are unemployed) in a year, compared with WBG 3 (47%) and WBG 4 (32%).

However, there are significant district variations within this. For example, Kurigram reports more than double the number of days "off" per month on average (16 days across all WBGs), than Pabna (seven days per month). This is almost certainly a result of intra-community differences in access to employment. In Pabna and Tangail WBGs 3 and 4 reported no shortage of labour demand at any time, while in Kurigram all WBGs reported some shortages of labour demand during the year, and WBG 1 reported up to 30 days of no work in some months. This is quite possibly due to a wider variety of nonagricultural employment options in the southern districts (with their proximity to the brick fields and to Dhaka). However, the variety of crops grown in the different districts is also a factor. Northern districts cultivate fewer different crops. Nilphamari and Kurigram, for example cultivate the fewest while Pabna cultivates the most (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of Crops Grown per District

District	Number of Different Crops Grown
Kurigram	5
Lalmonirhat	6
Nilphamari	5
Rangpur	6
Jamalpur	6
Tangail	8
Pabna	9

Outside of Pabna and Tangail, all WBGs face a scarcity of work during the lean period (September-November) however some villagers indicated things were relatively better than in the past. In the past they had to 'starve' during *monga*, but with the intervention of different safety net programs by the government, availability of early variety rice and the introduction of maize there is now some demand for labour during this lean period.

There is also a scarcity of work during June/ July (Figure 3) which is associated with lack of demand from Boro rice cultivation. Once again, maize does provide some labour demand during this period, in the districts where it is grown.

Who migrates, when and where to?

Migration is one type of coping strategy when local employment opportunities are scarce ('push' factors). Households also migrate to other areas when wage rates are relatively better ('pull' factors).

Extreme poor households, whilst reliant on daily wage labour are sometimes unable to migrate, for example if the household is female headed, male adults are disabled or chronically ill etc. Extreme poor households may also be risk averse, or unable to afford the costs of travel, lodging etc.

There is naturally some geographical variation across the study area in terms of when and who migrates. In general though, Figure 4 illustrates high migration ('push') during April-May (during *little monga*) and late October to early November (during *monga*). Migration is also high in other months due to pull factors, while months of relatively low migration correspond with the monsoon season.

Figure 4 illustrates that WBGs 1 and 2 migrate more frequently than WBGs 3 and 4. Households from WBG 2 migrate more frequently than households from WBG 1 because although they also rely heavily on selling their labour the fact that they are slightly better off means that they are more capable than households from WBG 1 (less illness or disability, better contacts etc.)

However, there are differences between the districts in terms of which WBGs migrate, which indicates that a lack of options is more severe in certain areas. Lalmonirhat and Rangpur are the only districts where all the WBGs migrate. By contrast in Pabna and Tangail WBGs 3 and 4 do not migrate, suggesting that employment insecurity affects only the lower WBGs in Pabna and Tangail.

Respondents frequently mentioned that March-April and April-May are the months of high wages which correlates with the main rice growing season of Bangladesh and the harvesting of the Boro and IRRI rice crops. Inter-district variations in wages during this period can be large, from as low as Tk 90 per day (Kurigram) to Tk 225 per day (Pabna) within the same month and for the same activity (rice harvesting). This undoubtedly drives migration.

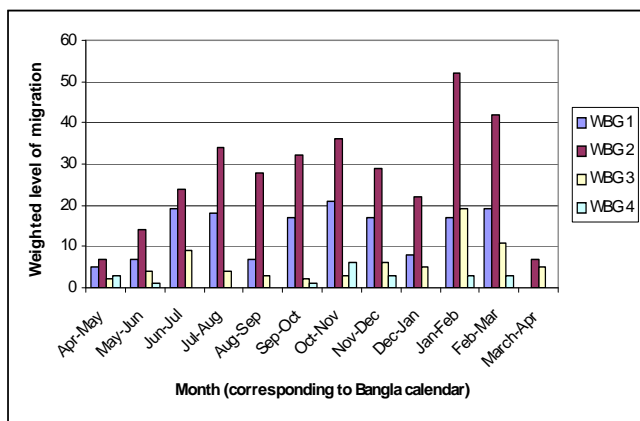




Chars Livelihoods Programme

Reducing Extreme Poverty on the Riverine Islands of North West Bangladesh

Figure 4: Migration by WBG and month⁷



Choice of destination varies by season, district, WBG etc. The principal destinations include:

- Tangail (proximity and similarity with the chars environment)
- Dhaka (more options and earning opportunities)
- Bogra (relatively close, central urban centre)
- Comilla (paddy cultivation and intensive agriculture)
- Gazipur (garment sector and small scale industries)

Remittance flows

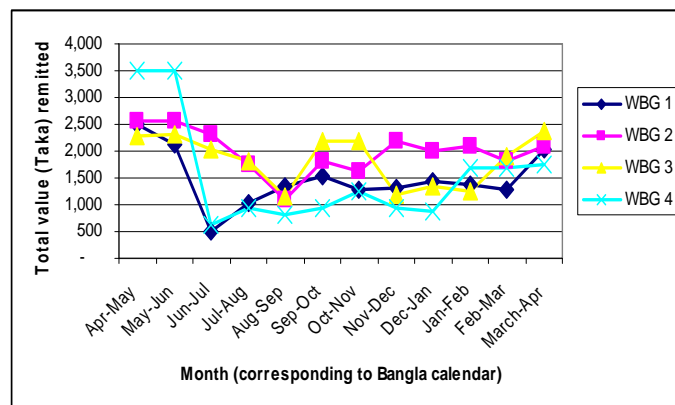
Factors influencing the amount remitted include wage rates on offer, the cost of living in the destination and the type of activity undertaken. The highest wage recorded was Tk 350 per day by migrants from Pabna & Jamalpur whilst the lowest recorded was Tk 120 by migrants from Lalmonirhat and Kurigram. Migrants from Tangail also reported the highest remittances. This could reflect greater diversity of work available around Tangail (beyond agricultural day labour), perhaps as a result of its proximity to Dhaka. Conversely, Lalmonirhat reports the lowest average daily wage for out-migrants, which could be a result of its geographical isolation reducing the ability of migrants to make the journey to places such as Dhaka, where wages may be higher.

Wages of different categories of labour vary in different months during migration. This is important at the district level, because the activities that out-migrants are involved in differs between districts. 78% of migrants from Pabna reported working in non-agricultural activities during migration, the highest level of any district. By contrast in Nilphamari, one of the most remote northern districts, just 6% of migrants were involved in non-agricultural activities (the lowest of any district).

Figure 5 shows the mean value of remittances per household in each of the WBGs by month (only those

households that migrate). The value of remittances varies widely by WBG and by time of year. Remittances are generally lowest for WBG 1 because they are reliant on offering low skilled labour. WBG 2 also offers low skilled labour but they migrate more frequently (Figure 4)

Figure 5: Average remittances by WBG and month



Is there a continued demand for CLP's Infrastructure Employment Project?

Monga still exists and there is a continued demand for earth work activities by the community. This demand is stronger in the northern districts. For example, In Lalmonirhat respondents from all WBGs would be prepared to do manual labour during *monga*, while in Tangail only WBGs 1 and 2 reported the need for any intervention during *monga*.

The CLP's target, as per the Programme Memorandum, of 6 million person days IEP through plinth raising alone is unrealistic: Assuming 80,000 plinths are to be raised during CLP-2, 30% of which will be raised during *monga*. Assume also that each plinth requires 100 person days. The maximum number of person days available for plinth raising during *monga* is 2.4 million person days.

Even if earth work activities were not constrained to plinth raising activities alone but included earth works for community projects such as road construction, the target of 6 million person days is still unrealistic simply based on population figures alone. A target of 2.52 million person days IEP is more realistic (see assumptions)⁸.

Conclusions

Monga still exists and is strongly related to the lack of local demand for agricultural labour. *Monga* affects the poorest households of the community who are reliant on selling their labour.

⁷ Score available of 0 = no migration, 1 = low migration, 2 = medium migration, 3 = high migration. 21 villages visited and therefore total available score of 63

⁸ 1) Based on current data there are 210,000 hhs in CLP-2 working villages (from 8 Districts including Kurigram, Gaibandha and Jamalpur), 2) assume 40% of all hhs contribute 20 days of labour during each IEP season, 3) assume IEP operates in each village for 1.5 seasons. Calculation: (40% x 210,000) x 1.5 seasons x 20 days = 2.52 million





Broadly speaking, residents of the southern districts grow a wider variety of crops, experience higher demand and wages for their labour, are less reliant on agricultural labour for income, and receive higher wages during migration than their counterparts in the north. This results in a variation in the impact of *monga* and the mitigation strategies of households across the working area.

Monga and the resultant fall in demand for local labour 'pushes' households in all WBGs to migrate in search of labour but particularly those households from the poorer WBGs. Some extreme poor households are however unable to migrate because they do not have the means to do so e.g. female headed households.

Migration is related to, but not always driven by lack of available work locally. Wage rates in other districts are an important 'pull' factor. Most migration takes place outside the *monga* period.

In the short term, cash for work can be relatively effective during *monga* and is popular. However, it is unlikely to be a long term solution.

In the longer term, the introduction/ promotion of crops that demand labour during *monga* (such as maize and early maturing Aman rice) could be a way forward – especially in the northern districts. Ultimately, diversification of livelihoods away from agricultural labour is needed.

Recommendations

- Revise down the target of 6 million person days for IEP through plinth raising activities. A target of 2.4 million person days is more realistic;
- Continue/ scale up the IEP safety net scheme for extreme poor households unable to sell their labour during *monga*;
- Continue to lobby GoB and other organisations to increase/ initiate cash for work schemes on the *chars* during *monga* to assist households once CLP has left the village (a role for the Partnerships' Division);
- Maize and early maturing Aman rice can create employment opportunities during *monga*. The CLP should consider exploring this in more detail e.g. 1) linking with the Department for Agricultural Extension, 2) through the work of the proposed Agricultural Services Providers, and 3) through the making markets work for the poor project.
- Consider prioritising the northern districts for interventions to mitigate *monga*.

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December 2011