



Understanding the Monga in Northwest Bangladesh: Household Perceptions and Perceptual Connotations

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Abstract

This paper sets out to understand the Monga vulnerability in Rangpur region of northwest Bangladesh from the perspective of affected households. The local term 'Monga' means a famine-like situation and it has caught public interest recently. Based on empirical evidence from five villages in the Rangpur region using different qualitative methods, the findings highlight that the Monga predisposes the households to multi-sphere experiences of hunger and poverty. It is not just one consequence of income poverty; rather, the social and livelihood mechanisms of poor households are dysfunctional, multiply rooted in their entitlements, capabilities, their ways of living, and the negotiations they have with the complex network of institutions that affect households both singly and synergistically.

Keyword: Monga, vulnerability, seasonal hunger, food insecurity, poverty.

Introduction

Although a few other districts of Bangladesh suffer from Monga-type problems to varying degrees, they are most marked in the northwest region, generally known as greater Rangpur. This region nowadays has a new identity as “*Mongaakkranto*” or Monga-affected¹ despite the fact that there were debates about its very existence until 2005 when it was at last institutionalised into the country's Poverty Reduction Papers (PRPs). The local term ‘Monga’ is most commonly defined as a famine-like situation that hits every year in two spells: a severe period during the Bengali months of *Ashwin –Kartik* (Mid September – Mid November), and the less severe one is during *Chaitra – Baishak* (Mid March – Mid May). A group of people, particularly female-headed households, agriculture wage labourers, marginal and small scale deficit farmers are the most affected due primarily to seasonal unemployment and lack of cash, related with the local single to two rice crop economy that is inadequate to meet their needs in those two periods. The Monga situation is more severe some years because of the wide scale impact of natural disasters like floods, riverbank erosion, and drought. The worst situation is to be found on the river islands (*char*). As a spatial distribution, Monga conditions mainly prevail in five districts of Rangpur Division, namely Nilphamari, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram and Gaibandha, along with peripheral areas prone to riverbank erosion and regular droughts (Figure-1). There is no official data about how many people are Monga-affected, however one unofficial source estimates about 4.1 million².

Recent Monga severity suggests that the situation is not markedly different from the past. It amounts to endemic food deprivation and hunger and the suffering of the northern poor is

not merely a matter of seasonality; rather, it is extended beyond seasonality. If a household is food insecure during the Monga there is a likelihood that it will remain food insecure after the crisis season³ due to the outcomes of a variety of household risks. However, an important weakness in the Monga-related literature has been its generalized discussion and we wish to argue that, as a recurrent phenomenon, its relational status and the distinctive seasonal hunger situation have yet not been well understood especially with regard to the *Mongaakkranto* households. Research elsewhere highlights the need to incorporate local discourses on famine and hunger into scientific research, thereby exploring people's own vulnerabilities⁴. This is important because insiders' and outsiders' perceptions often differ significantly⁵. In this paper we will therefore deal with the Monga issue comprehensively using households' own observations and perceptions. This enables us to contextualise three related issues: i what perception households have about the Monga; ii the temporal variations in household fortunes; and, iii how the Monga is associated with everyday household livelihood issues and concerns during that season and beyond. The paper will also attempt to define the Monga by linking household perceptions and their vulnerabilities to their present social and livelihood context.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative method and yielded data of a type that is surprisingly rare in food security research in Bangladesh. Deploying semi-structured interviews with affected households and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with villagers, this paper investigated people on their own ground, interacted with them in their own language, and on their own terms created new vocabulary around the Monga. The fieldwork was one

session of six months from the first week of October, 2011 to the end of March, 2012, carried out in five purposively selected Monga-affected villages (two mainland village, two isolated river Char villages and one attached Char village) in the Rangpur region. This period covered both the *Kartiker* Monga season followed by the harvest and post harvest time of *Aman* (normally a good time for the rural poor) and the short period of the *Chaitra'er* Monga. Emphasis was given to documenting diverse variations and different conditions as well as important common patterns.

A total of 14 semi-structured, open-ended and one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with the heads of Monga-affected households. These focused on eliciting participants' perspectives on the entire dimension of Monga vulnerability. Along with interviews, eight FGDs with villagers, women and

men separately, were carried out to provide a representative snapshot and systematically to explore the everyday livelihood insecurity situation that exists in the Monga-prone areas. Each FGD session comprised a small group of five to eight participants of the same gender to ensure homogeneity within the group and heterogeneity between them. All semi-structured interviews and FGDs were transcribed, collated and coded and thematically analysed to identify key patterns and trends. Doing so, all interview and FGDs were coded according to type of method used (I – interview; F – Focus group discussion; IF – Informal Discussion); gender (F – Female; M – Male), age, occupation (WL – Wage labour; SF – Small Farmer; MF – Medium Farmer; M – Maid; DL – Day labourer), and where they were conducted (ML – Mainland; CL – Char land; AC – Attached Char). Some of the expressions of household heads were used as quotations.

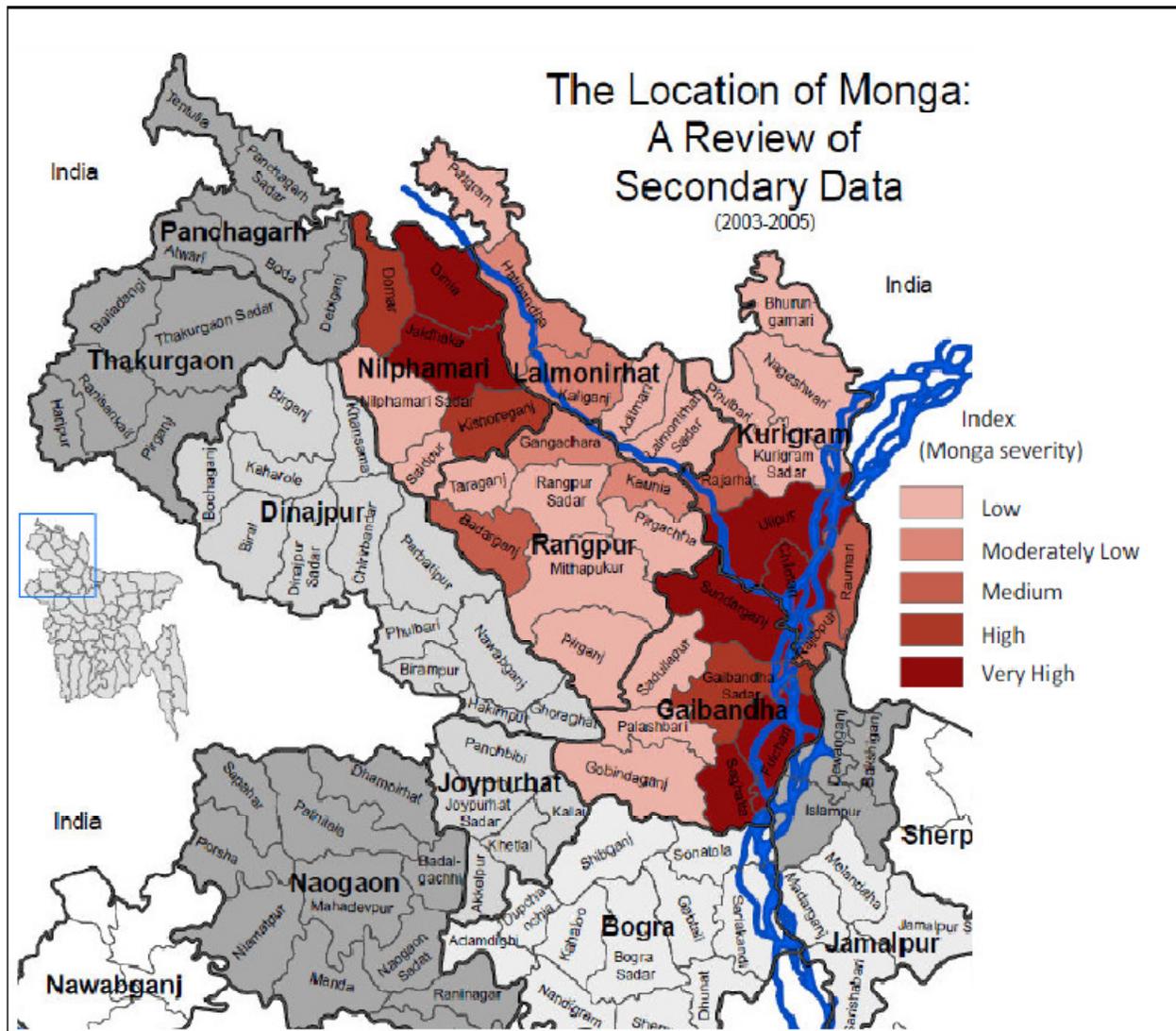


Figure-1
 The location of the Monga prone areas according to their severity

Results and Discussion

Monga in the Villages: Household Perceptions: At the very beginning of the first author's field work, one day when he was discussing the Monga with some villagers at a local bazaar he solicited the views of two old men. They commented that "*God helped our fathers and grandfathers to survive the Monga and now he is helping us to face it by all means. It is not new to us (IF/M/WL/ML). 'The Monga is our old problem; it was here even in the British period. In the past, we suffered, but nobody knew' (IF/M/SF/ML).* These two statements testify to the Monga's long-run and historic significance but the field work revealed that people frequently use two Bengali terms to mean Monga in a generalized way: *Abhab* and *Akal*. For example, "*When Monga occurs, our 'Abhab' is increased. We do not have a job, money; we cannot buy food' (I/M/WL/CL).* "*Monga is Kartik mashi (Bengali month Kartik) 'Akal'. We have to pass day after day hungry. We have to suffer a lot; our 'Abhab' is increased' (I/M/WL/ML).* These two terms are found in earlier research works, usually used as synonyms of Monga^{6,7,8}. But our finding is that there are subtle but important differences. Households refer to the term *Abhab*, as 'want', mainly the lack of access to food and other essentials, caused by natural disasters such as floods, socio-economic issues (e.g. income shortfalls), political planning failures (e.g. absence of non-farm activities), and other causes. But usually households connect this with their general food insecurity situation, for instance "*we are poor; we cannot buy good food every day, Abhab is our daily situation' (I/M/WL/ML).* On the other hand, *Akal* is a famine or famine-like situation. Most household heads, participants in the FGDs, and other local people over 50 years gave the 1974 famine as an example of *Akal* and mentioned that *Akal* is not prevalent now. But one old man (approximately 90 years old) said that in his childhood when a severe Monga happened they called it *Akal* and they sang a song about it. This began as follows:

*The severe Monga hits our land,
People are forced to eat arum and wild roots,
And countless people are dying from place to place,
But the Monga never ends ...*

When the *Akal* (severe Monga) happened people died and it had a temporal dimension as it ebbed and flowed. The old man added that people aren't dying today due to lack food in the way that the *Akal* was experienced in the past and it seems that even though the Monga has existed for a long time, it has not always been a matter of public concern.

In the time before the harvest of *Aman* crop, during two Bangla months of *Ashwin* (mid September – mid October) and *Karkit* (mid October – mid November), poor agricultural wage labourers don't have any employment in the agricultural sector and the marginal and small farmers face a cash flow crisis and their *Abhab* becomes severe. There are no alternative jobs and different coping measures are necessary to survive. The

disruption of income has implications for household consumption and normal food intake decreases significantly, leading to starvation. A widespread food insecurity and hunger situation prevails amongst the poor and, if the price of any essential item increases or is unavailable in the market, the situation is called a Monga of that particular commodity. For example, if the oil price increases beyond the pocket of poor people or if the supply is temporarily cut off, that is called a '*Tele (Oil) er Mong'*(a Monga for oil). Thus a widespread *Abhab* corresponds to a Monga. But in the particular season noted above, when many people's livelihoods become precarious, the resonance of earlier famine experiences influences local people to use the term *Akal*, although as we have seen it is not exactly an *Akal*. Most households seem to view the Monga as having the characteristics of both *Abhab* and *Akal*; it is a seasonal widespread extreme form of 'scarcity'¹ or seasonal hunger and a dearth condition in their livelihoods that occurs every year (figure-2).

Households also reported that if any individual household faced a similar situation at any other time outside the Monga season, that is not referred to as a Monga; rather, as an *Abhab* of that particular household. However, well-off households are not affected as they have sufficient savings and surplus as insurance for the Monga crisis period. Moreover, sometimes they take advantage of this situation in different ways like offering low wages and loans with high interest to the poor, knowing that they have little option but to accept. Thus the Monga in the study areas is wholly a crisis of the ultra poor segment who are dependent on the agrarian sector. This can be best expressed in three interlinked points: i. the Monga is a 'season specific recurrent event'; ii. it is primarily 'cause specific'; and, iii. it is a 'community crisis' of a certain class of people. Based on the primary perception of our households, we may say that the Monga syndrome is not just a 'famine-like situation', and it is even beyond mere 'food insecurity'.

Causes and temporality of the Monga: Temporal Connotations of Agricultural Linkages: Agriculture as a dominant factor in creating the Monga was found in the people's own oral tradition: "*Our hard time [the Monga] is the Mora kartik (referring to Kartik as a dearth month) as Aman is in the field. Our provisions are scarce and last until Aghrayan, which then brings a new season of rice and cash' (F/F/W/Akaluganj Bazar).* In other words in this region the long pre-harvest time of the dominant crop, *Aman*, corresponds to the *Kartik'er* Monga. As stated earlier, after the ploughing and levelling of the fields and the transplantation of the *Aman* paddy in August, the marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, who form the majority of the population, have no employment from September until the harvest in December. For almost two months the opportunities for wage labour are minimal. "*In the sowing and harvesting season we can work 16 to 22 days per month. But during the whole Monga period we hardly work four or five days. If I'm lucky, I can work eight to ten days' (F/M/WL/Akaluganj Bazar).*

Before the introducing of irrigated *Boro*, the little *Monga* or *Chaitta er Monga* used to extend up to the *Aus* plantation in mid-April. Traditionally the cultivation of the local rainfed *Boro* had been very marginal due to the shortage of water and instead *Aus* was planted which is low yielding. This *Aus* planting was started in *Baishak – Jaistha* (Mid April –Mid May) and after the harvest there was no employment until the next *Aman* planting. But lately, HYV *Boro* has replaced *Aus*; it is planted from *Poush* (Mid December – Mid January) and finishes in *Magh*

(Mid January – Mid February) just immediately after the *Aman* harvest and its harvesting starts at the end of *Basihak*. Besides, crop diversification in the region (figure-3), such as the introduction of maize, potatoes, winter vegetables, wheat are also spreading seasonal load of work and food supply and as a result the *Chaitra-Baishak* *Monga* season is now less severe or less lengthy. However, although agriculture may have reduced the length of the *Monga* season to some extent, it has not alleviated the poverty and chronic food insecurity in the region.

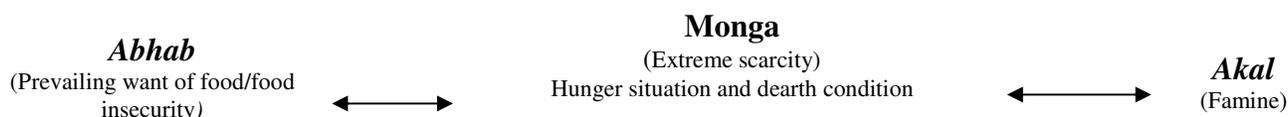
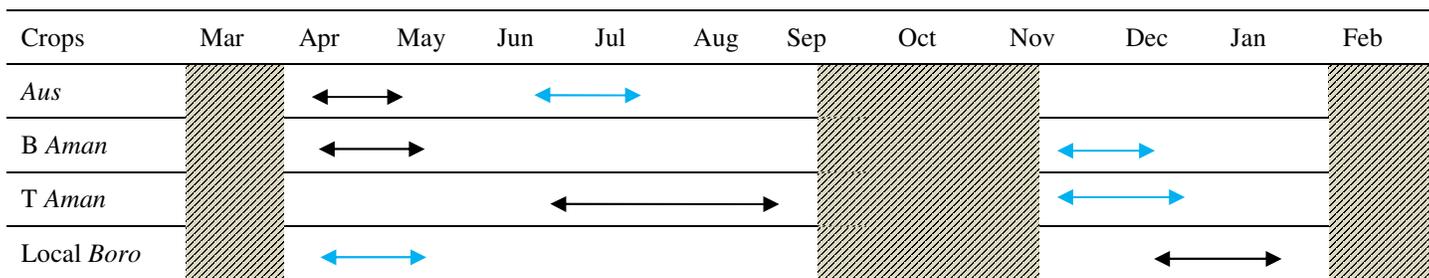
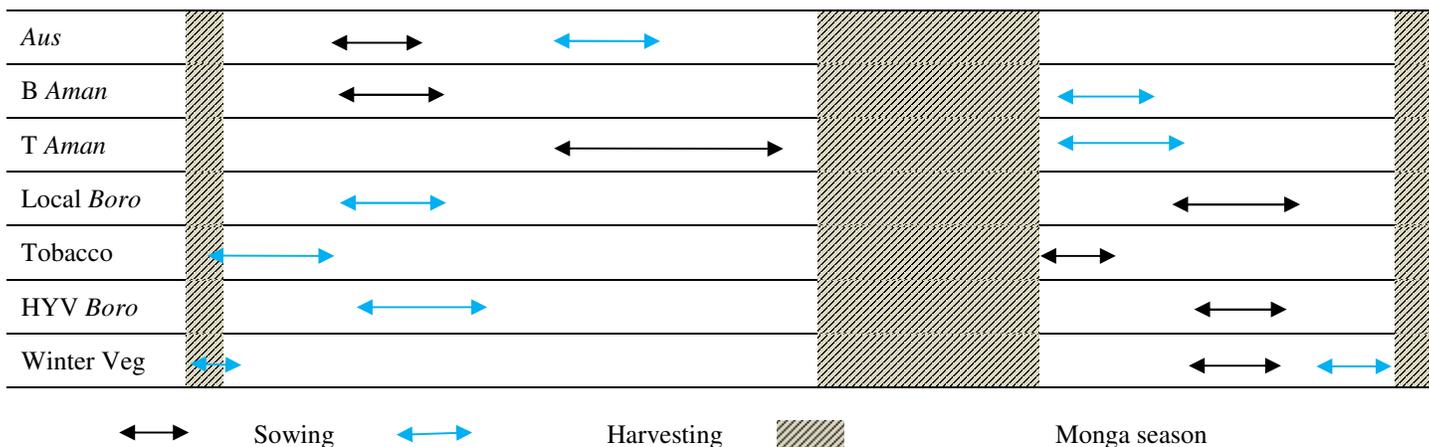


Figure-2
 Monga continuum according to the householders' view

MONGA PAST



MONGA PRESENT



Source: Households and FGD participants, and Shamsuddin *et al.*, 2006.

Figure-3
 Monga temporality (based on household perceptions) past and present

However, this phenomenon of seasonal unemployment-related vulnerability is not unique to the case of northwest region. While the shortage of agricultural work affects all of Bangladesh, it is more acute in this region, mostly affecting the districts of greater Rangpur. The northern upazilas have on average four less work days per week in the lean season compared with the rest of the year¹⁰ and wages are lower¹¹. Indeed, this regional disparity along with the underlying causal factors contributes to the Monga experienced in greater Rangpur.

Transcending Agricultural Linkages: Households also reported other interrelated reasons for the Monga beyond the agricultural and these can be correlated with more structural socio-economic factors, political constraints, and local disasters. Soon after the *Aman* transplantation is over, household food reserves and savings are depleted. Households adopt different strategies to cope with the situation, such as informal loans from local moneylenders at high interest rates, sales of their labour at reduced wages, contracting new loans from micro-credit providers if possible, and also the sale of domestic animals, property and standing crops in advance at a low price. Temporary migration in search of work to other districts is another option. Some resort to eating unconventional foods, often leading to diarrhoea and other health maladies. Natural calamities such as floods, drought, and river bank erosion may exacerbate the situation as these are considered major causes of impoverishment and destitution¹². The island *char* dwellers are even more vulnerable than the attached *char* dwellers in terms of inundation of crops, homesteads and cultivable land. Sometimes the Monga runs through until December and such variation mostly depends on plantation times after the floods recede. Some households also report a lag in recovery from the Monga because farmers do not always pay harvest labour immediately. Government and NGO programmes try to help the affected people but only in a limited way. Households may have to survive an extended period without proper meals and sometimes with no food at all.

Contextualisation of Household's Everyday Livelihood Concerns: From the above discussion it is clear that though the Monga has meaning and context as an 'event' in itself, it is not an isolated episode or purely chance misfortune. Rather, it is an event in the sense of being an exceptional period connected with the everyday life that surrounds it. Highlighting the non-agricultural issues, the Disaster and Emergency Responses Group suggested that "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 end, many people become worse off for a long time to come¹³. They endure its hardships, but at the cost of increased levels of malnutrition, selling their productive household assets, and an unsupportable burden of debt." In some regards the Monga represents the negation of all that is normal and familiar, and in hungry desperation people turn to unfamiliar foods, families disintegrate, and there are many other negative effects. Taken

together they add up to a collective crisis exceptional in its scale and intensity. This exceptionality of the Monga is part of its distinctive character. The following scenario stated by one agriculture wage labourer gives an idea of the overall situation during the Monga:

"During the Monga I have no work, no money. If I seek money from others, they refuse. We cannot eat a belly full of food. If I am lucky enough to get work, it is poorly paid and insufficient to buy food. Sometimes it happens that I get a job and work the whole day long but in the evening the Mohajan (Rich household head/ Landlord) says that he will pay the next day. Then I have to take food loan from the nearest grocery shop by promising that I will reimburse the price tomorrow. Sometimes we have to pass days having only potato or kachughachu (Arum). We adults can bear the pain of hunger, but the kids toss about in pain. They become ill and suffer from diseases. In some years the Chairman and Members of the union or NGOs provide relief, but not all households have access. It is usual that I am forced to sell my limited assets like goats, thala-bason (plate and glass), choki (bed), at a very cheap price. In the Monga season of 2008, I mortgaged my homestead land to the Ajar Mohajan, and still I am paying the loan at a double interest rate. My wife took a loan from BRAC (A leading NGO) last year to buy a goat. We bought two goats but I had to sell one of them this Monga period to maintain my household expenditure. She is now a defaulter. We are now returning the loan and consequently we are not able to save money. If any problem arises, we have not left any choice but to take a loan again, if it is possible" (I/M/WL/Akaluganj Bazar).

Though hunger is the main crisis, studied households were found to have their own perceptions of the Monga (table-1). Rather, it would say that households apparently have different views of the Monga situation depending on its relative impact on them, their own household status, and on their coping strategies. For instance, wage labourers spoke of the Monga in terms of their employment status, while small asset-holding households tended to view the Monga in terms of a lack or shortage of household means to deal with the crisis.

From table 1, it seems that the households see the Monga as more than the 'specific hardships' of one season. They sometimes say its effect is perennial, with two consequences for their livelihoods: the issue of food crisis, and the issue of dearth. As household food access in this period is extremely weak due to lack of income, access to and over resources, and limited purchasing power, most households buy to little amount of food. Households always extend their available resources to manage food for their family¹⁴ and the poor households are locked into daily food deficits. A base line survey report on the Monga showed that among the survey households, the incidence of starvation such as skipping meals from time to time increased from 10 per cent in the non-Monga seasons to a staggering 50 per cent in the Monga period. Likewise, nearly half of the households took only half meals in both the Monga and non-

Monga periods. The households that undergo starvation during the Monga are also likely to experience food deprivation to some extent, though in a milder form, in the non-Monga seasons. And those that are exposed to starvation during a Monga season expect to suffer hardship in the next Monga season as well¹⁵. Besides, the calorie consumption of the Monga region is not only less than the rest of Bangladesh in the Monga season, but also in the other seasons¹⁶.

The circumstances of our respondents are formed by broader socio-economic issues like poverty or lack of political underpinning and also by specific events or circumstances such as floods. Their resilience in the face of such crises is related to the household choice of survival strategies combined with activities to meet each day's changing needs. For example, not confining to agriculture, a marginal farm household is often involved with non-farm activities like *rickshaw* pulling for diversifying their income so as to meet their everyday needs. Though a major influence on households' preferred strategies is their existing skills, resources and social and political networks, in general, households' adopted strategies are undertaken in the context of their real problems reflecting their actual needs. Such understanding is often undervalued by the actors in properly defining the Monga and its associated perpetual crises. In our view it is a mistake to correlate the Monga with famine-like situations which can be eradicated by short-term strategies.

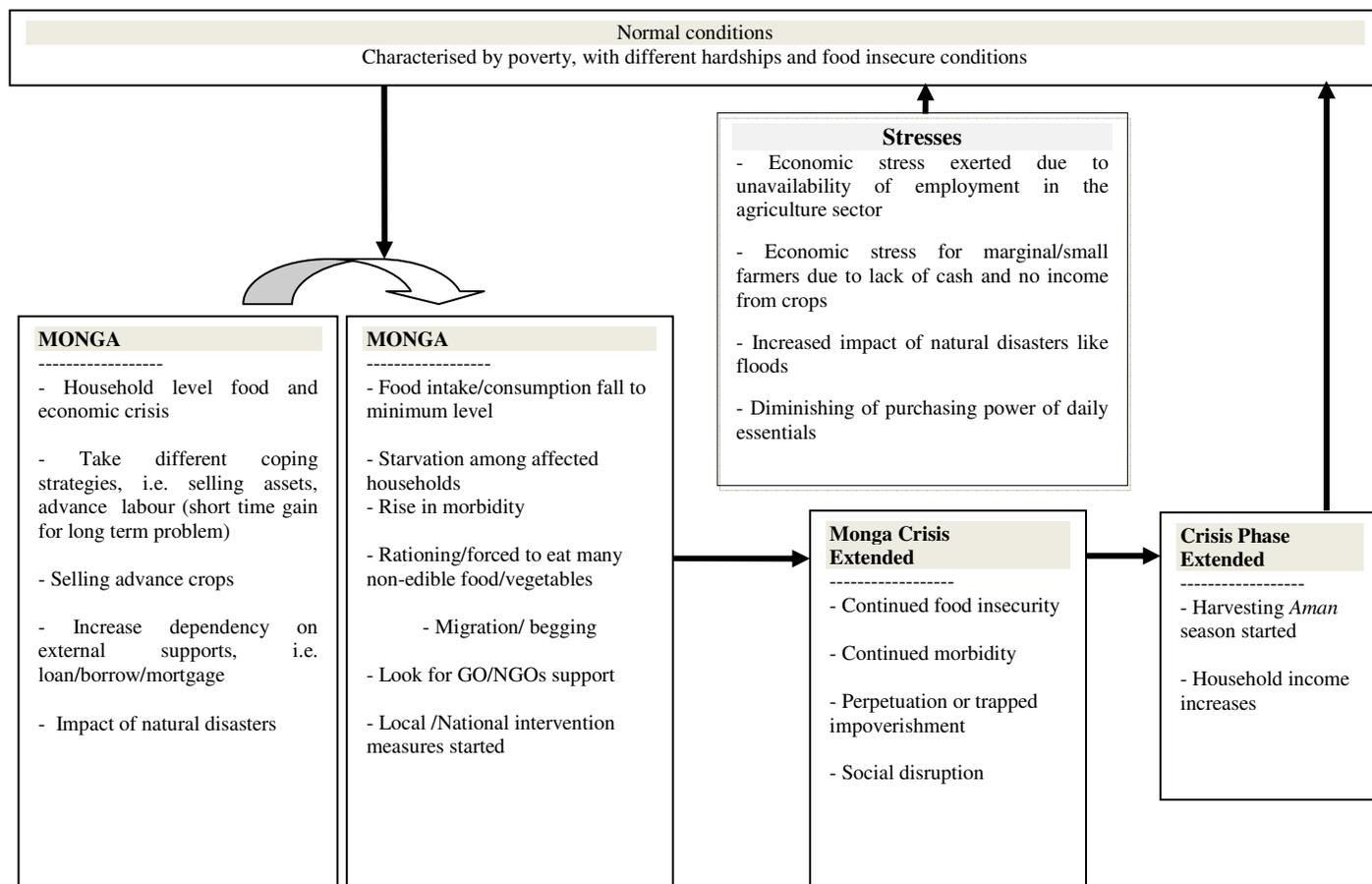
Table-1

Household perceptual connotations of the term Monga

Household	Issues
All households	Period for <i>maanga</i> (seeking from others)
	Time of depending on relief
	Lack of cash/savings to buy food
	Lessening in both the amount and number of meals the household prepared
	Consumption disparities
	Poor quality of food intake
	Sale of labour in advance at a cheap rate
	Increased burden due to natural hazards
	Debt pressure
	Pressure of large family size
	No cash for healthcare/treatment
	Selling and mortgaging of household assets
	Child involvement increases in begging or other works
	Push to take socially unacceptable ways to meet needs
	Pregnant women, children and aged persons suffer most
Increased morbidity	
Limited access to social services	
Char households	Remoteness or isolation
	No OMS (Open Market sales)
	Sell cattle at a premature stage at a lower price
	Decrease of getting food from CPRs
	Decrease in support from other households
	During flood drinking water and sanitation problem
Female-headed Households	High migration tendency creates family isolation
	Increased dependency on begging
Farm-based households	Stop children going to school
	Social dignity lost in changing occupation

Source: Modified and reproduced from Zug, 2006

Linking household perceptions to define the Monga: From the above discussion of household perceptions we can see that there is a relationship between chronic poverty and the Monga. The latter is not merely a lack of food and goods but a matter of failed entitlements as "starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat"¹⁷. As we have already seen, certain classes of people in this region have very little or no production-based, inheritance and transfer entitlement. They have only their own-labour entitlement. The Monga occurs exactly at the point when there is no labour market available in which to sell their labour because the rice crop stands in the field¹⁸. Many of our respondents go for binding contracts involving labour power obligations that hinder them producing much from their own labour; they lack enough land and necessary capital; and they also lack accompanying skills. In addition, they do not have any social security benefits except for some inadequate relief or social-safety nets. However, the Monga does not affect the poor equally, just as the poor are not equal. This is because their exchange entitlements vary depending on what economic prospects are open to each person and the "social relations of production in which household participate"¹⁹. Thus within this poverty-ridden and chronic food-insecurity, a class of marginal people are affected as a cause and consequence of socio-economic, political and ecological marginalisation. Households take some coping measures that sometimes are very close to the emergency conditions of a famine, but the Monga situation is worse than a famine because food insecurity is 'normalised' and therefore does not attract the same attention from political and aid actors and the current Monga eradication programmes are therefore inadequate. The vulnerability of the Monga can also be seen as a space of 'enfranchisement'²⁰ without a secure 'social entitlement'²¹.



Based on households interviews, FGDs and modified after Elahi and Ara (2008) and Shamsuddin *et al.* (2006)

Figure-4
The Monga cycle in Northwest Bangladesh

Moreover, if we look back at the Monga continuum in figure-1, we can see that it is severe hunger/ famishment situation existing in-between dearth (*Abhab*) and full blown famine (*Akal*), and also a widespread 'community crisis'. Thus, the Monga can be defined as a cyclical pattern of seasonal poverty that prevails in certain groups of poor people in the northwest region, resulting in entitlement failure leading to a widespread food insecurity and hunger situation to a point where the affected households can no longer maintain a sustainable livelihood¹⁷. A compact scenario of this Monga cycle is presented in Figure-4.

Conclusion

The recurrent seasonal phenomenon of the Monga is found to be both as an aggregate shock and to some extent, an extension of year-round poverty and food deprivation conjoined with an array of socio-political and ecological jeopardy. The effort to produce their main staple *Aman* and *Boro* harvest is a significant factor that has governed the way the northwestern poor have been traditionally trapped in the Monga. The first order impact of the Monga is on the unemployment of the poor in local area, which affect drastically on household cash earning income in second

order, and the third order impacts on household food security including their nutrition levels.. The Monga seriously depletes the resources available to access food and reduces the ability to recover from social and political stresses resulting in chronic food insecurity. Food access for actual consumption during the Monga exhibits serious differences from the 'normal' time, both inter-village and intra-household. As female-headed households and other households in isolated *chars* are the most vulnerable, even in normal seasons, their suffering is inevitably increased during the Monga. Our findings also suggest that seasonal food insecurity and hunger experienced by households over many years have resulted in the long-term marginalisation and impoverishment of the affected people. The simple contextualisation of households' everyday livelihoods indicates that their crises are not only confined to short term survival; rather, the seasonal unstable situation results in long-term marginalisation and impoverishment. Ridiculous as it seems, the government is as yet unable to remove a calamity like the Monga that is predictable in all aspects: timing, duration, nature, severity, areal extent, the size and the class of the affected population. There still exists a lot to do in making structural changes in the social and economic conditions of the Monga-affected areas.

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