

IN FOCUS

2012 Floods in Bangladesh and food insecurity

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On average, one-third of the country is flooded during the monsoon season, becoming a common fact of life in Bangladesh. However, due to the importance of the agricultural sector in the country and its sensitivity to environmental disruptions, ensuring food security -- both in the aftermath of a disaster and in the long run -- is a critical issue for the country. The great level of poverty in Bangladesh, which currently stands at 40 per cent of the total population, further exacerbates the threat to food security (GoB, 2010).

Floods and food insecurity

On the 25th and 26th, June 2012, the Chittagong division faced 65 cm of rainfall, one of the highest recorded rainfalls in the last two decades. The rain lasted for a month, inducing flash floods, and major rivers flooding. The conjunction of those events explains the severity of the damages. Despite under-coverage by local media, this was the worst flood and landslide to have hit the Chittagong region in the last 60 years (WASH, Shelter and Early Recovery Cluster & GoB, 2012). Official estimates found that 1,700 acres of crops had washed away; entire villages were submerged; and more than 200 mud roads had been destroyed. As the affected regions struggled to recover from the floods, thousands of people were left food insecure. Poultry farms and fish hatcheries were also severely affected, both of which are important sources of protein in the Bangladeshi diet (Ibid.).

Food security is threatened by natural disasters as these events cause food prices to increase and incomes to decrease, which heightens a household's vulnerability to future crises that threaten food security (del Ninno et al., 2001). Improving the level of food security remains a key development goal for the country.

Understanding food insecurity in Bangladesh

Under normal conditions, more than two-thirds of the rural poor face food insecurity during the lean (*monga*) season before the rice

harvest, which occurs in September/October as well as in March/April. Other contributing factors to food insecurity include a large and growing population, lack of assets, debt, social exclusion, low job opportunities, marginalization, and of course, natural disasters (ACF, 2013). In urban areas, food insecurity is mainly determined by unemployment or under-employment, and a lack of marketable skills due to low levels of education (Ibid.).

Food security is not only about production stocks, but also about the future food requirements, level of income and commodity prices (Yu et al., 2010). Currently, the major challenge for the country is to keep up with the food demands of a fast-growing population (1.3% growth rate) with increasing incomes. On average, the dietary diversity is quite low; in 2008, the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) reports that a full 76 percent of calories come from cereals (mainly rice), with the remaining 17 percent coming from other plant and animal sources (primarily fish) (Rizvi, 2013).

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