

## LIFE HISTORY OF MONG MARMA (34)

| Shiree Q2 Research on Extreme Poverty in Bangladesh  |   |     |      |     |    |
|--|---|-----|------|-----|----|
| Author   | Nikhil Chakma   |     |      |     |    |
| Institution  | Green Hill  |     |      |     |    |
| Household ID   |   |     |      |     |    |
| Interviewee name                                     | Mong Marma  | Sex | Male | Age | 34 |
| Ethnic group and religion                            | Marma, Buddhist   |     |      |     |    |
| Livelihood before the intervention                   | Firewood collection, wage labour and jum cultivator   |     |      |     |    |
| Well-being Status before the intervention            | Extreme Working Poor (category two)   |     |      |     |    |
| Marital status, children and other household members | Married, lives with wife and their two children (one daughter and one son)  |     |      |     |    |
| Village, union, upazilla and Zilla                   | 3 no. Bandarban Sadar union, Bandarban Hill district  |     |      |     |    |
| Dates of Interview                                   | June 16, 2012, August 27, 2012  |     |      |     |    |
| Keywords   | Jum cultivation, abandonment, domestic abuse, health shock, conditional land, community support, Chittagong Hill Tracts |     |      |     |    |

### INTRODUCTION

Mong (age 34) lives with his wife, son and daughter at Krau Amtoli para under Bandarban hill district. Their livelihood is based on selling firewood, jum cultivation and wage labour. They have no registered land but sometime cultivate agricultural crops on other people's land with various conditions. He has two hens and 15 chicks as productive assets.

Mong's father left his family when Mong's mother was still pregnant with him. Before he left the household his father sold all their productive assets. His mother then went to his parent's house to survive along with her three children. After staying five to six years in her parent's house his mother got remarried to a man from a moderate poor family. Mong and his elder sisters also went to live at their new step-father's house after their mother's marriage.

Here his step father mistreated him and he didn't attend school. When he was 12 he went to live at his maternal aunt's house and helped with jum cultivation and livestock grazing.

In 2005 he got married out of his own choice, and was supported by the community for marriage costs. Following a short period living with his aunt he moved to his father in law's house as per custom, though this didn't end well and they moved out a year and a half later. During this period their first child (a daughter) was born and a son was born three years later in 2009. Mong has relied on a range of small businesses, experienced health shocks and been forced to sell labour in advance. He has been supported by his community in difficult times and managed to build up a small amount of chickens. His household also received support from the government in early 2012.

#### WELL-BEING JUST BEFORE THE SHREE INTERVENTION

In May 2012 the household became involved with the shree programme; prior to this their well-being was as follows:

| Indicator   | Just before the intervention  |
|---|---|
| Well-being category   | Working Extreme Poor (category two)   |
| Diets   | Three meals per day, for breakfast rice with salt, lunch and dinner with vegetables, fish once a month  |
| Livelihoods now) in terms of contribution to that years' income<br><br>For other principal adult member | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Firewood collector</li> <li>2. Jum cultivation</li> <li>3. Daily labour</li> </ol><br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Jum cultivation</li> <li>2. Daily Labour</li> </ol> |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Productive assets now rank them in terms of value (e.g. land, livestock, rickshaws), | 1. Two hens and 15 chicks   |
| House and homestead: ownership, condition of tenure, condition of house.             | Own house, occupied land from Headman (without ownership), bamboo made house roof with sungrass |

## LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

### CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH (1978-2004)

#### **Father abandons family**

Mong was born in 1978 in Pransa para under Bandarban sadar upazila of Bandarban hill district. Before he was born his father abandoned his mother and his two elder sisters. His family owned 20 cows, three acres of productive agricultural land, and ten acres of teak garden but his father sold these and took the profits. He was later told by elders that his father had “fallen in love with another woman and left the house secretly in order to get married to her”.

After being abandoned his mother and two sisters stayed in their home until he was born. His mother moved them to her parent's house where they cultivated jum and she did daily wage labour. Due to their poverty he and his sisters never went to school, though he can write his name in Bengali.

#### **Mother remarries**

In 1984 his mother married a man from Master para, Bandarban sadar. At the time he was six years old and his elder sisters were aged eight and ten. After their marriage the family went to live at the new husband's house. Mong said that his step father had four acres of cultivable land, 20 cows, two pigs and about 50 chickens. In 1986, after they had been living at the house for about one and half years his first step brother was born.

#### **Suffers abuse and moves to other family**

Despite the family's wealth Mong was severely mistreated by his step-father. He reports having been beaten and threatened with being thrown out of the house and sent to Bengalis. He wasn't able to eat well and didn't have clothes to wear and his step-father spent all the money on himself. He was also unable to go to school.

In 1989, after spending four years at his step father's house, he moved to live with his grandfather. Here he helped with the cultivation of jum crops and collecting products from the forest.

Having spent three years with his grandfather in 1992 he went to his maternal aunt's house at Master para under Bandarban sadar union to help them cultivate agricultural crops on ploughable land. Here he sometimes also took livestock for grazing. From age 15 he also worked as a manual labourer for which he earned 60 Taka per day. This work involved clearing the forest for cultivating jum land, breaking the bricks and excavating earth works.

### **Seriously injured by hunting accident and hospitalised**

During this period while he was grazing livestock in the forest one day he was accidentally shot in the lower abdomen by his uncle and some friends who had been hunting deer nearby and had missed their target. Falling unconscious his uncle helped him and sent him to Chittagong medical hospital for treatment. His uncle also paid for all the treatment and Mong had to stay six months in the Chittagong medical hospital. After fully recovering he went back to live at his aunt's house and continued cultivating jum crops.

### **MARRIED LIFE AND EARLY ADULthood (2005-2012)**

In 2005, at the age of 27, he got married to a girl from Rojar para named Sui Ching Marma (aged 29). His wife was from the same Marma community and they married through their own choice. During discussion he said that community people arranged the marriage ceremony by donating money. A total of 15000 taka was spent at the marriage ceremony, of which the community people raised 14400 taka and he contributed 600 taka.

After one year of married life he moved from his aunt's to his father in law's house, and in 2006 their first daughter was born. He managed to hire six khans<sup>1</sup> of ploughable land to cultivate but this was attached to terms and conditions. He had to pay the owner 25 hari<sup>2</sup> of paddy in a year for each khani. Given these conditions, and the low productivity of rice, he only cultivated the land for one year. However during this period he was unable to cultivate jum crops, as he didn't have access to jum land.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2.5 khans is equal to one acre.

<sup>2</sup> One hari is equal to 10 kg of paddy.

### **Separation from father in law's house**

Mong, his wife and child lived with his father in law for only one year a half. The household was growing larger therefore making it stressful and he had many arguments with his father in law. He constructed a new house with bamboos and sungrass in the same village and got land for constructing a house from the mouza headman<sup>3</sup> on a temporary basis.

### **Coping with health shocks by selling labour in advance**

In 2007 he got an abscess in his left foot which became infected. They had no money to treat it and so he went to his employer who was a landowner and local leader. His employer gave him a loan of 1500 taka on the condition he sold his labour in advance. It took one month for his foot to recover during which he was unable to work, but he received help from community people who donated rice.

Mong estimated that every year he has to spend 1000 taka on health issues and that sometimes he had arguments with his wife because of his inability to maintain family expenditure.

### **Birth of second child and coping through community support**

In 2009 his second child (a son) was born in their newly constructed house. Although his family size had increased his income was lower because of a lack of work opportunities and his wife couldn't work due to their new born baby. His main income source was selling firewood in the village and to local traders that was collected in the forest and could earn 150 taka every day. During the rainy season however it was harder to sell because the wood was wet and so income was much lower. Selling wood locally he could get 30 taka a day, however selling in market he could get 100 taka. The forest where he collected it is four to five from the house, and he would visit the forest every day at least three or four times.

During the lean season his wife saved a handful of rice every day and stored it in a bamboo-basket before cooking. The lean period was particularly hard as he had no money left and when his second child was born he couldn't cultivate jum by himself, but was helped by the community (see box 1).

---

<sup>3</sup> "Headman" here refers to the head of a mauza, which is an administrative unit in the CHT, consisting of several villages or hamlets. A mauza headman has administrative power to access land up to five acres for jum cultivation and 0.03 acres for homesteads under CHT Regulation 1900.

**Box-1: Exchange labour each other for Jum cultivation/**

Traditionally in the CHTs community people help each other with jum cultivation. Jum cultivation is highly labour intensive, including slashing, burning, land preparation, sowing, harvesting and hauling. Moreover, most families cultivate jum crops long distances from their homes. It is therefore not possible to cultivate jum crops alone especially for extreme poor people with a small family size. For this reason they exchange labour for cultivation of jum crops. They didn't pay any money or trade other goods in this system. In the Chakma community this system is called as *Maleya*.

**Decision to breed hens leads to success**

In 2011 Mong started to rear poultry as a new strategy to improve his household's situation. He said that nobody helped or advised him to do this and that he had raised the money by depositing five to ten taka every day from the money got from selling firewood. One day, he realised that his savings totalled 500 taka and decided to buy hens. He bought a hen with 250 taka and the next month bought another hen with the rest of the money. Now, in 2012, he has 15 chickens in his household and hopes that after selling the poultry he will be able to buy pigs or goats.

**Rents in land on fixed rate basis**

In 2011, he received 40 decimals of land for plough cultivation on the condition that he gave 25 haris of paddy to the landlord irrespective of whether the rice production was good or not.

**Coping with health shocks again by selling labour in advance**

In 2011 his daughter (then aged six) became sick with fever, an abscess and asthma. They visited the doctors in Bandarban town which cost 1800 taka. He raised this money by selling his labour in advance to his employer for 2000 taka. Early in 2012, his son (then aged three) was afflicted by asthma and an abscess which cost 750 taka for treatment and he again raised the money by selling his labour in advance.

**Receiving VGF from Union Council Member because of his poverty**

In early 2012 he received 28 kg of rice from the Bangladesh government (under the Vulnerable Group Feeding programme) as his household were so poor. The Union council member distributed the rice among the extreme poor peoples, and Mong said he had a good relationship with the Union Parishad. However he said that without labour they couldn't

help the poor. At present, his wife is also working and is involved in wage labour and exchange labour.

## CONCLUSION

Mong experienced one of the most significant shocks in life before he was born. The abandonment by his father from a position of relative wealth with a number of productive assets forced his mother to rely on wider family. When his mother remarried he was mistreated and unable to gain an education. This forced Mong to again rely on wider family where he contributed through involvement in jum cultivation, livestock grazing and day labour.

Mong's marriage highlights the important role his community has played throughout his life. His marriage costs were almost entirely paid for by the community, and during difficult times such as after a health shock and after the birth of his second child, his community helped maintain his household's consumption and livelihood.

A range of health shocks have had serious negative impacts on his livelihood. Aside from the opportunity costs in not being able to work, and the increased expenditure for medical care, they have also forced Mong to sell his labour in advance in order to get access to credit. This has undoubtedly impacted his ability to improve his household's situation and he identified this process as a major cause of his poverty. Wider market relationships in the form of harsh conditions on which land can be leased has made it difficult in two instances for him to sustainably maintain this form of livelihood.

Mong identifies the impact of seasonal unemployment and shortage as a serious detriment to his household's condition. Connected to this, access to jum land has decreased over the years, forcing him to rely on collecting firewood which is highly seasonally dependent.

SEASONAL LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITY MAP

| Type of work activity      | Day and income | JAN   | FEB | MARCH | APRIL | MAY | JUNE | JULY | AUG | SEPT | OCT | NOV | DEC |
|----------------------------|----------------|---|-----|-------|-------|-----|------|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Agricultural land          | Day            | In 2011 he cultivated 40 decimals of agricultural land. He harvested 55 haris of paddy, but access to the land was on the condition that he gave 25 haris to the landowner. |     |       |       |     |      |      |     |      |     |     |     |
|                            | Income         | 30 haris of paddy.  |     |       |       |     |      |      |     |      |     |     |     |
| Wage labour                | Day            | Worked as a wage labourer four to five times a month  |     |       |       |     |      |      |     |      |     |     |     |
|                            | Income         | He earned 200 taka per day so total income was 1000 taka  |     |       |       |     |      |      |     |      |     |     |     |
| Selling of firewood        | Day            | He collected firewood from the forest ten times per month   |     |       |       |     |      |      |     |      |     |     |     |
|                            | Income         | He made 1500 taka per month selling firewood  |     |       |       |     |      |      |     |      |     |     |     |
| Total income approximately |                | His monthly income was 2500 taka  |     |       |       |     |      |      |     |      |     |     |     |

## LIFE HISTORY MAP

| Dates     | Well-being movement | Reasons   |
|-----------|---------------------|---|
| 1978-1983 | 3-2                 | His father left their household before he was born. His mother moved the household to her parent's house  |
| 1984-1988 | Remained at 2       | Mother got remarried and the family went to live in his step father's house. His step-father mistreated him.  |
| 1989-1994 | Moved up to high 2  | He moved to his grandfather's house from step father's house and then again shifted to his maternal aunt's house. While grazing the livestock in the forest he got seriously injured and went to hospital for six months. |
| 1995-2006 | Remained at low 2   | He got married, went to live in his father in law's house and had their first child, a daughter. He cultivated agricultural crops with condition on leased in land. His first child (daughter) was born.                  |
| 2007-2009 | Remained at low 2   | He separated from father in law's house after a year and a half and built a house in the same village. Health shocks forced him to take loans by selling advance labour. His second child (a son) was born.               |
| 2010-2012 | Remained at low 2   | He started to rear poultry and cultivated 40 decimals on leased-in land. His daughter and son became ill which again forced him to sell labour in advance. In 2012, he received support from the government.              |

# Life history map of Mong (34)

Middle elite

Lower earning non-poor

Moderate poor

Working extreme poor

Destitute

Father left their family before he was born. His mother moved to her parent's house along with children

Mother got remarried. He went to live at his step father's house and was mistreated.

Moved to his grandfather's house and stayed for two years before moving to maternal aunt's house

He got married and went to live with father in law and cultivated agriculture. In 2006 his first daughter was born

He started to rear poultry and cultivated 40 decimals of agricultural land

Had accident and went to hospital for 1 month

Children become sick forcing to raise money by selling advance labour

Stayed at maternal grandfather's house for two years

His second child (son) was born but in 2007 he became sick forcing him to take a loan and sell labour in advance.

He received 28 kg of rice in support from government

1978

1984

1989

1994

2005

2011

2012

S