

Policy Brief

Eradicate Poverty by 2021

Sylhet Division



Introduction

Sylhet is a unique region with lowest rate of poverty and yet raising trend of extreme poverty mainly because of presence of a number of ethnic hill community presence of a number of haors and tea estates. The agricultural productivity in haor areas is very low and migrant workers of tea estates do not have desired land rights within the estates. Despite being one of richest region in terms of natural resources and concentration of migrant population, the region remains to be sea of the extremely poor people.

Sylhet is one of the few divisions of Bangladesh which has the lowest rate of poverty and yet it has been showing a rising trend in the extreme poverty rate. This Division has a unique mix of cultures and ecosystems. Nearly 87 percent of population in rural while 0.7% are from ethnic hill communities such as Monipuri, Khasia, Patra, Lusai, Garo, Hazong, Tripura, Tipra and few others. At the same time, it is a garden estate with hundreds of 136 tea gardens, and 5 rubber plantations in its hills and haors with thousands of beels as well as reserve forest areas. Sylhet also has the largest stock of natural gas of Bangladesh. Incidentally, it also has a large proportion of migrant population primarily in UK and in European and American cities.

Despite all these, there are people who are living in extreme poverty state. Most of them are primarily living in the haor areas where people can only grow one crop a year. These haors are prone to both flash floods and river floods. There are 31 haors which is 17 percent of the total land area of the division.

HIES data predicts that there are more than 2 million people still living below the lower poverty line in this division (see figure above). But more importantly, extreme poverty is rising in rural areas (between 2005 and 2010 estimates) while urban extreme poverty has declined. Rising rural poverty in this division is a unique phenomenon and so it requires more investigation if the goal of eradicating extreme poverty by 2021 is to be achieved.



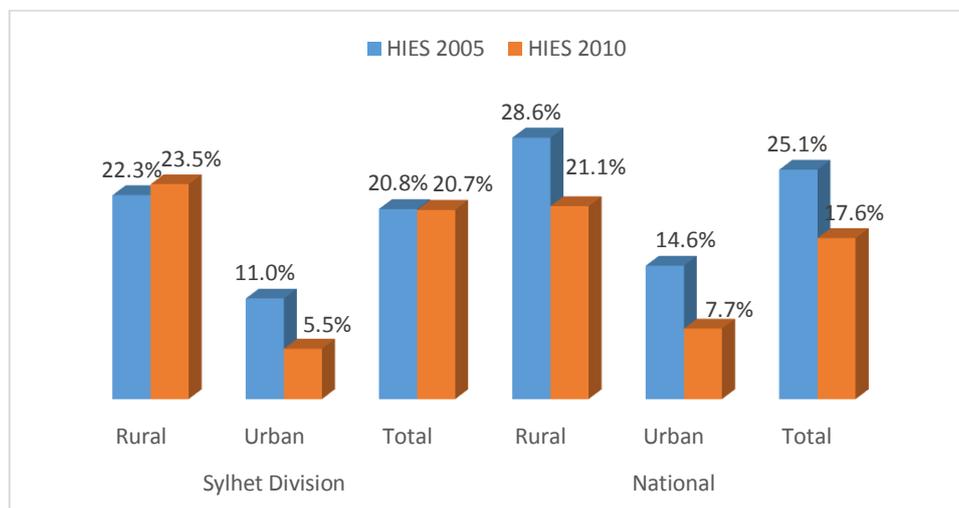
Policy Brief

Eradicate Poverty by 2021

Sylhet Division



Figure: Extreme poverty in Khulna and Barisal Division



Source: HIES 2010, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

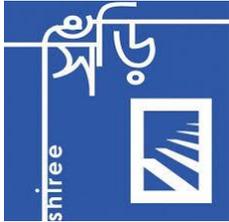
It is in this context, EEP/Shiree organized workshops across the country to interact with local stakeholders (including extreme poor households, NGOs and government officials). The overarching goal of these workshops was to learn from local stakeholders about major challenges to overcoming extreme poverty in the region and to what extent policies should be re-focused in order to achieve 'zero extreme poverty'. This brief summarizes the proceedings from the workshop organized in Sylhet.

Challenges and opportunities

Low agricultural productivity in Haors

Haor land is part of a unique ecosystem which goes under water during the early monsoon (late April to May) and holds fresh water till the end of the rainy seasons in (October). Each of the local beel inside these haors are also mother fishery where parent fishes take refuge during dry seasons. However, most of the waterbodies are leased by the government as such local people cannot access these resources during hard summer months.

For the population, they can easily harvest a second rice crop if haors are protected against flash floods during late April and early may. [This creates a classic dilemma of



Policy Brief

Eradicate Poverty by 2021

Sylhet Division



externality in economics – if haors are protected against such intrusion of rain water from the Hills of Meghalaya, India it would have destroyed boro crops in riparian regions of Bangladesh – consequently, the sufferings of the haor population bring benefits to people located in the Surma, Kushira, Monu, Khowai, and Meghna river-basins but they do not pay for the services of the haors]. Local people demand protection against flash floods which is the main cause of their poverty. Introduction of short-duration crop has been a strategy but it has not been fully successful. However, there are some good news. Helvetas Swiss Intercooperative (an EEP/Shiree partner) has been able to cultivate 600 hectares of fallow land for vegetable cultivation for the poor. In addition, floating agriculture using water hyacinth as beds, and cage fishing during summer months could significantly improve the agricultural income in the community leading to jobs and income for the poor.

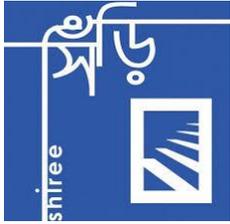
Access to Social Safety Nets

Social Safety Nets is an important protection against poverty for the extreme poor families. Given the fact that extreme poverty is on the rise in this division between 2005 and 2010, there is need to revise and rationalize such allocation so that its coverage is increased.

A study has already shown that if targeting errors of two safety net programs (EGPP and VGD) can be rectified then 2.76 lakh additional beneficiaries could have been added to the system. Stakeholders also suggested for enhanced monitoring of these programs with participatory framework for selection of beneficiaries at the local level.

Access to Finance

Remote villages in the haors are also the least covered areas with micro-credit facilities. One of the major challenges is to bring them under coverage so that through their entrepreneurial skills and hard work the poor can increase their income. Local people also raised issues regarding a) 'eligibility criteria' of formal credit providers, as they are difficult to meet; b) absence of MFIs in remote haor areas; c) low financial literacy among local people; d) problems in meeting weekly repayment procedure of micro credit providers; and e) problem with respect to marketing of products due to poor transportation links between haors and towns.



Policy Brief

Eradicate Poverty by 2021

Sylhet Division



Low employment opportunities

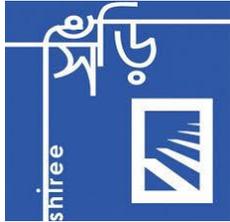
Nearly 1.5 lakh youths in this division are unemployed, it is 6 percent of the cohort compared to 4.5% in Bangladesh. Rate of unemployment among young educated ones is even worse (7.3 percent among SSC and 13.74 percent among HSC graduates). Despite the fact that Sylhet has better ambient environment in terms of land and natural resources, there is very little growth in employment opportunities for the educated youths in Sylhet. In this connection, investing in infrastructure like Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to cater for industries using the rich natural resources of the Division (like fish, stones, tea, natural gas, etc.) has been argued by the local stakeholders. This, according to them, will create jobs for the youths.

Redistribution of Khas Land

Land is one of the most valuable resources. Local stakeholders suggested that extreme poor households must have priority access to these lands during redistribution by the government. They hope that this will provide them a sense of security and protection against natural disasters. However, it was also discussed that a) most of these lands are unsuitable for agriculture and b) the land area is not demarcated well – making it even harder for poor people to hold on to the land even when they receive a proprietary rights on the land. Furthermore, the process of allocation of land by the government is cumbersome and so it is difficult for the poor household to lay claim without assistance from civil society groups. For a female-headed household, the difficulty level is even higher.

Vulnerable Groups

Presence of vulnerable groups in a society makes it even more difficult to deal with extreme poverty. Presence of physically or mentally challenged groups is an important challenge in any society. In absence of public facilities that are friendly to them (like roads, educational institutions, transports, etc.) families need to sacrifice a job to help them. This contributes towards sustenance of extreme poverty. This is also true for ethnic communities if they are not allowed to freely integrate with the rest of the population in terms of employment and income. Finally, tea estate workers in Sylhet were brought in to Sylhet by the British from Odissa, India and Nepal. These people were never fully integrated with the locals because they were living within the tea estates and they had no rights on land. As such, their ability to



Policy Brief

Eradicate Poverty by 2021

Sylhet Division



lead them out of poverty has been very limited. Allocating customary land-rights to these people on land not used for tea production is an easy solution to lead them out of poverty. In recent times, a government attempt to allocate these lands (not suitable for tea production) to establish SEZ has been mired with protests from the garden workers. Clearly, it indicates that in absence of legal recognition of customary rights on such land, these people can easily be stripped off their rights to live on such land.

Policy Recommendation

In summary the policy prescriptions for eradicating extreme poverty from this region can be:

- Revise the leasing arrangement of water bodies in haors so that local people fishing rights.
- Encourage vegetable gardens during dry months and cage fishing.
- Improve access to finance by encouraging banks and MFIs to go to haors.
- Proper redistribution of khas land.
- Better land rights for the tea estate workers.
- Faster implementation of SEZs to provide greater number of employment for the Extreme poverty.
- Smart and transparent Social safety net.