

Policy Brief

Eradicate Poverty by 2021

Rangpur Division

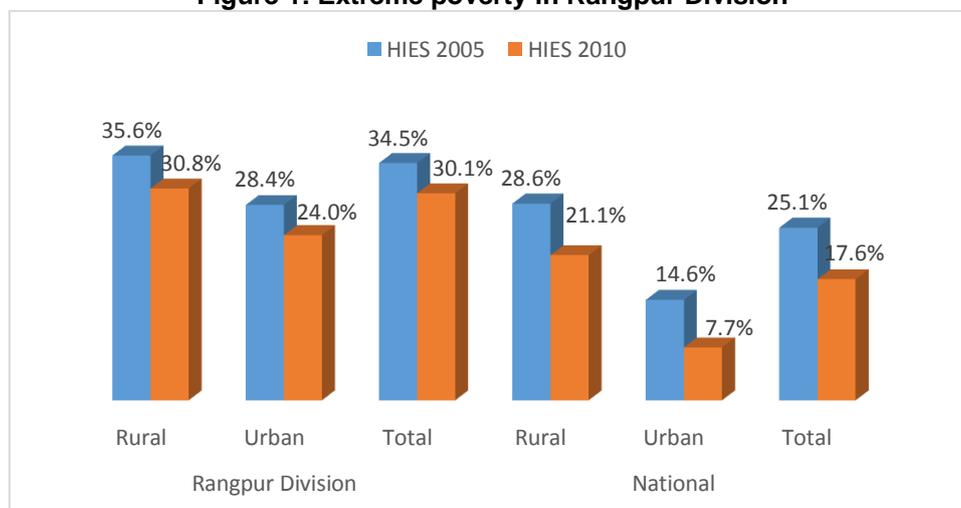


Introduction

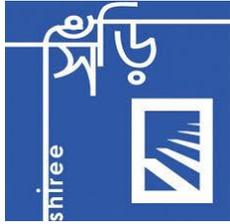
Rangpur Division has certainly improved its image as it was a seat of extreme poverty. Thanks to improved connectivity through Bangabandhu bridge over Jamuna and number of targeted monga related poverty eradication programs, the situation has certainly improved. But even now, the char and river erosion affected areas of Rangpur division remain extremely poor.

Rangpur has been a *monga*-prone (seasonal hunger) area for a long period. It is mainly due to dependence of the people on agricultural employment. Each year in the months of October and early November agricultural employment plummets and this forces thousands of people without work and income. However, it has changed in the recent past due to introduction of agricultural diversity led by poultry and livestock farming. Crop agriculture in the district is often damaged due to floods (both river floods and flash floods) and it was difficult for people to overcome the income gap created by these disasters. Introduction of non-crop agriculture has been a good relief for this area. However, many people in the division also lives in *chars* (islands inside the meandering river *Jamuna*), where poverty is still quite extreme. *Char* lands are fertile but susceptible to occasional floods and droughts. Life in some *chars* are without basic services like schools, shelters, hospitals, and even markets for their produces.

Figure 1: Extreme poverty in Rangpur Division



Source: HIES 2010, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics



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According to the published statistics by BBS, over 4.5 million people are still living below the lower poverty line in this division (see figure above). While extreme poverty has decreased in this area in between 2005 and 2010, it still is above the national average.

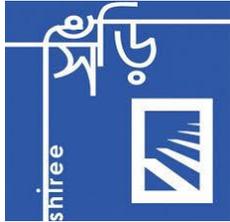
While the government of Bangladesh is committed to completely eradicate extreme poverty from the country by 2021, achieving this goal will require a proper understanding of the poverty of this region. It is in this context, EEP/Shiree organized regional level workshops across the country to interact with all stakeholders ranging from the extreme poor themselves to local government personnel. Representatives from public administration, who are in charge of implementing government policies, NGO workers and local people participated in the workshop. The overarching goal of the workshop was to share with the regional stakeholders the major challenges to overcoming extreme poverty in their region and to determine a common strategy to deal with it. This brief summarizes the proceedings of the workshop organized in Rangpur.

Challenges

Participants in the workshop through group discussion and brain-storming identified several challenges to the existence of extreme poverty in the region. To them, these challenges must be addressed in order to achieve 'zero extreme poverty' goal. While some of the challenges are generic in nature – meaning they are true also for other regions, there are some unique challenges for the people of Rangpur and hence it requires adoption of separate strategies.

AGRICULTURAL GROWTH IN CHARS

The biggest challenge in the region is to deal with extreme poverty in its char areas. These chars are detached from the mainland and have very poor infrastructure including support from agricultural extension services. These areas area also suffers from multiple natural disasters – both drought and flood. Therefore, it is important that *chars* in Rangpur are serviced through special agricultural extension and marketing services for agricultural produces like pepper, groundnuts, watermelon as well as for dairy farms and cattle ranches. These are essential elements, according to them, for promoting agricultural growth in the chars.



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BRINGING NEW CHARS UNDER CULTIVATION

The meandering nature of the river often creates temporary chars – that appear and disappear for many years. During the process, these chars remain unutilized or are often become a source of conflicts between rival groups. It is important to bring these ‘newly’ accreted land into production system. It will create new jobs and also income for char people. Activity of the Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) in assisting the extreme poor in accessing and using unused sand-bars and other barren lands for pumpkin cultivation was cited as an example in the workshop. Similarly, participants see potential for promotion of high value crop like strawberry production in the area.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO FINANCE IN CHARS

Extreme poor people living in chars still lack access to credit facilities. Participants identified some causes for this.

- Eligibility criteria for accessing formal credits are difficult to match.
- Presence of MFIs in many chars is very limited.
- Financial services providers do not have local presence.
- Char people suffer from severe lack of understanding of the credit market.
- Transportation links with the mainland is not stable throughout the year.

All these factors led to low return from their agricultural activities, as they remain dependent on informal credit market at high costs.

LOW ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES – PREJUDICES AND POVERTY CYCLES

Due to ‘remoteness’ char areas are still being serviced by the government from the nearby mainland. This is a major problem because it reduces access to education of their children, access to health services and access to agricultural extension services. The result is – proliferation of informal services by local powerful elites at a high cost. The ultimate impact is on the life of these people who remain dependent on the local groups for education, health and other public services and so they cannot break the cycle of prejudices and poverty.

CREATING NON-FARM JOBS

Rangpur division has over 9 percent of the working age population of the country, among whom at least 4 lac are currently unemployed. This division is still very weak in terms of creating non-farm jobs. The Uttara Export Processing Zone needs improvement in its facilities to attract investment. The division is connected well with



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the rest of the country via rail links to both Mongla and Chittagong ports, and airport links with Dhaka. In addition, it has natural resources like hard-rock mines and coal mines. There is a need to develop strategies to attract investment in the division to create non-farm jobs.

Policy Recommendations

The 'Manifesto for the Extreme Poor' has clearly identified 6 key issues that keep people in extreme poverty. While the document also presents a general set of way forwards regarding how to address these issues; in the regional workshops organized at Rangpur division, participants themselves put forward some additional recommendations for the region.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR YOUTHS

While the government has been working on developing the economic zones, participants also emphasized on developing curriculum to promote vocational and job-oriented education for the youths keeping in mind the needs of the poor households.

IMPROVE ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES AND TRANSFERS

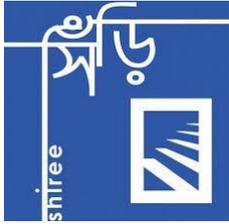
The social safety net programs (SSNPs) of the division need to focus on the special needs of the poorer households and increase their access to these programs particularly in the char areas. However, in addition to looking at the safety net programs, priorities should also be set for delivery of other public service programs like agricultural extension services, educational services and health services in hard-to-reach areas like chars.

DEALING WITH EXTERNAL SHOCKS

Extreme poor households are also living in areas that are prone to both economic and natural shocks, like floods and droughts. Therefore, there should be special considerations to equip households on how to deal with such shocks in order to cope up for the losses from these shocks. In this regard, farmers could be provided with an insurance scheme to deal with these shocks.

SPECIAL PROGRAM FOR MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Weak and marginalized social groups living in Rangpur such as *shaotals* and other ethnic communities need support to deal with social exclusions from the mainstream



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Muslim population as well as they also need support to deal with their own social taboos in terms of mixing with others. There is, therefore, a need to develop a social campaign against social taboos and exclusions in order to help these marginalized communities.

In short following policy prescription may be highlighted for complete eradication of poverty from Rangpur region:

- The youths need special attention for their skills development.
- Improve social safety net programs using available ICT technologies
- Provide drought and flood prove seeds to poor farmers.
- Design special program for the marginalized groups.