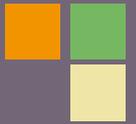




Seasonality Revisited

Perspectives on Seasonal Poverty



Seasonality Revisited

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**Seasonal Poverty:
Integrated, overlooked and
therefore opportunity**

Robert Chambers

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with contributions from Dee Jupp and Anirudh Krishna

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Abstract

Since the first seasonality conference in 1978, there have been changes: not least, communications have improved, and food prices in SubSaharan Africa have become more volatile. But much has not changed: seasonal poverty and stress remain widespread and integrated. Urban slums are affected but it is especially in rural areas during tropical rainy seasons that many adverse factors continue to interlock. Hard work, sickness, lack of food, poverty of time and energy, shortage of money, isolation and lack of access to markets and services are among factors that combine to make these times of multiple stresses and vulnerability for poor people. There are also other aspects of seasonal deprivation that were part of the lived experience of poor rural people and received little or no attention in 1978: accidents; animal diseases; funerals; powerlessness to bargain; wet clothing and being cold; leaking and collapsing shelter; and theft of food and livestock. Other factors that may be missed or deserve more attention are food intake and absorption in sickness, and defecation behaviour in rains and infection from faeces.

The perceptions and priorities of urban-based professionals, and the seasonality of their travel, campaigns and insights combine to hide seasonal deprivation and its integrated nature. Even if they perceive seasonality in the concerns of their own discipline or specialisation, professionals are unlikely to see the interlocking connections with other domains as they are experienced in the lives of poor people. Statistics too have aseasonal biases, often recording data on an annual or averaged basis which does not include seasonal variations. and understating the incidence of sickness during the rains. Remarkably, some books on poverty by well informed and leading analysts do not appear to consider seasonal dimensions at all. Season-proofed by their living environment, caught in urban traps, many professionals are season-blind.

These professional disabilities can be tackled on many fronts: making visits during the rains; immersions (see Appendix A) to reveal and internalise the integrated nature of seasonal deprivation; facilitating PRA-type visual analyses by poor rural dwellers; repeatedly raising questions of seasonality in meetings. One test is how frequently, if at all, seasons and seasonality appear in the indexes of reports and books, and how frequently seasonality or its absence is picked up by book reviewers.

The past neglect of seasonal dimensions to rural poverty presents an opportunity. It may often be more cost effective as well as more humane through counter-seasonal measures to enable people to avoid becoming poorer, than, once they are poorer, to enable them to struggle back up again. Precisely because they have been neglected, counter-seasonal measures present more pro-poor potential than they would have done. The new prominence of social protection and of climate change in international, national and academic discourse can help to draw attention to the many dimensions of integrated seasonal poverty and to the imperative for informed action.

Integrated Seasonal Poverty and Stress

That for poorer people, especially in tropical conditions, poverty and stress have strong seasonal dimensions is scarcely a new revelation. It has always been known by those who experience it. Hard work in agriculture, infections and sickness, food shortages, quality and prices, nutritional status, household reserves of cash and other assets, communications, transport and markets, social relations, and access to services – these are all interlinked in negative ways. Seasonally poor people are screwed down, and it is often during rains that there are downward ratchet effects of poor people becoming poorer (see Krishna in appendix B).

Those professionals, not themselves rural or poor, but who have been close to rural life throughout the year, have known this. A classic example quoted by Gerry Gill (1991) comes from Leonard Wolf's novel Village in the Jungle based on his experiences while an administrator working in Hambantota District in Ceylon. A mother speaks:

‘I say to the father of my child, “Father of Podi Sinho,” I say, “There is no *kurakkan* in the house, there is no millet and no pumpkin, not even a pinch of salt. Three days now and I have eaten nothing but jungle leaves. There is no milk in my breasts for the child.” Then I get foul words and blows. “Does the rain come in August?” He says. “Can I make the *kurakkan* flower in July? Hold your tongue, you fool. August is the month in which the children die. What can I do?”’

The 4-7 July 1978 Conference on Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty, convened jointly by IDS and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, focused mainly on tropical rainy seasons. There was concern to elicit and understand the interlinkages of seasonal deprivations and stress as they were experienced. Arnold Pacey, the principal editor of the book of the papers (Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey 1981), contrived a diagram (on page 7) to indicate these relationships. The contributions were, though, mainly from specialised professional perspectives – climatic seasonality, energy relationships and food, economic relationships and the seasonal use of labour, the seasonal ecology of disease, patterns of births and death, family health and seasonal welfare, and the social distribution of seasonal burdens. Still, the overarching concern was to see how these coincided and interlinked and to identify what might be done.

The scenario in 1978

The scenario painted in 1978 (ibid: 5) was of

‘...a tropical environment where a wet season follows a dry season, and where cultivation is practised. Towards the end of the dry season, food becomes scarcer, less varied and more expensive. The poor people, who may be landless or have small plots of land, experience food shortage more acutely than their less poor neighbours. Some migrate in search of work. Others undertake non-agricultural activities near their homes in which the returns to labour are low. More work is involved in fetching water.

When the rains come, land must be prepared, and crops sown, transplanted and weeded. If animals are used for ploughing, they are weak after the dry season. Delays in cultivation reduce yields. For those with land, food supplies depend on the ability to work or

to hire labour at this time. For those without land, work in the rains and at harvest often provides the highest wages of the year. This is the time of year when food is most needed for work, but it is also the hungry season when food is shortest and most expensive. It is, too, a sick season when exposure to tropical diseases is at its greatest, when immunity is low, and when women are most likely to be in late pregnancy. So the rains bring crisis. Vulnerable to hunger, sickness and incapacity, poor people are undernourished and lose weight. Seasonal stress drives them into debt and dependence. The knowledge that there will be future seasonal crises constrains them to keep on good terms with their patrons. They are thus screwed down seasonally into subordinate and dependent relationships in which they are open to exploitation. The poor are subordinated to the less poor and the weak to the strong. Stress is passed down to the weakest – women, children, old people and the indigent. Sometimes the screw becomes a ratchet, an irreversible downward movement into deeper poverty as assets are mortgaged or sold without hope of recovery. This is, then, a time when poor people are kept poor and a time when they become poorer.

With the harvest things improve. Grain prices are lower, a benefit to those who must buy food but a disadvantage to those small farmers who must sell their crops to repay debts or raise money for ceremonies. After the harvest, ceremonies, celebrations and marriages take place. Body weights recover. The dry season sets in. And then the cycle begins all over again.⁷

The scenario was followed with caveats about creating an ideal type, overgeneralising, and missing major counter-seasonal factors like irrigation.

Changes since 1978

Since 1978 there have been major trends and changes. Some have diminished adverse seasonality. Since experiences of seasonality are worse those who are poorer than for those who are less poor, then to the extent that poverty has reduced across populations, so too adverse seasonality should have reduced. Seasonal isolation is still there but has diminished: networks of all-weather roads in many countries penetrate further into hinterlands and give those who live there better wet season access out from them, to markets and services; and other communications have improved, most recently with the runaway proliferation of mobile phones, on one estimate numbering 280 million in Africa alone.¹ Counterseasonal and relief programmes for poorer and more marginalised people, and social protection more broadly, have improved, transformed and spread, as evident in papers to this Conference. The Maharashtra Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, now expanded to a national scale in India through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, where well implemented will serve to reduce seasonal impoverishment and powerlessness, and has raised agricultural wages. Immunisation programmes have achieved wider coverage. Polio and Guinea Worm Disease, the latter so devastating to communities precisely when they need to cultivate, have been eliminated or nearly eliminated in most of the world. Malaria, for all that it remains a scourge, has sharply declined in the East African Coast of Kenya². And given the multiple

¹ Recorded from a presentation June 2009 by a UNICEF staff member to a DFID retreat. Whether this includes North Africa, or even if it is the number of people estimated to have access to mobile phones rather than the number of phones, it is still a dramatic figure representing a major transformation of communications.

² The incidence of malaria in Kilifi District on the Kenya Coast has dropped to one fifth of its level five or six years ago and there have been declines all along the East African Coast (conversation at the Kenya Medical Research Institute, Kilifi, February 2009).

interlinkages of dimensions, explored below as *integrated* seasonal deprivation, the weakening or elimination of one can be expected to have diminished vulnerability to others and to have enhanced resilience.

Other conditions for poor rural people have worsened. Structural adjustment in many countries reduced rural access to services of health and education, and led to a decline in maintenance of roads. Liberalisation imposed on African countries reduced or eliminated subsidies and uniform pricing regimes. These had supported farmers and rural people throughout the year and had moderated adverse seasonal scissors effects of prices for selling crops and purchasing food. Liberalisation in one country made it unviable for its neighbours to maintain subsidies and price supports because of cross border leakage. Though these trends have been partially reversed, for example in Malawi, they still generally prevail. Then climate change has already had an impact, not just through warming, but as papers to this conference show (Denning and McGrath 2009; Mbiru, Angona and Komutunga 2009) through rainy seasons becoming less reliable in onset and end, and bringing more intense rainfall at wider intervals. The long-term implications of these trends for agricultural livelihoods, especially in the semi-arid tropics, are serious. Even with adaptations of farming and cropping systems, they will make agriculture more risky and less viable for many, and are liable to reduce the production of food and non-food crops. For climatic seasonal effects on other dimensions of seasonality like disease, the patterns may be varied and difficult to foresee.

Generalisations about adverse seasonality may now be more difficult than they were in 1978. Since then there have been major demographic changes, not least in the increase in urban populations and number of poor people in urban areas. And as noted at the time, conditions and experiences of seasonality vary by location, occupation, gender, wealth and poverty, age, caste and class, and control of resources. To any generalisation, exceptions can be expected. Nevertheless, I shall argue that seasonality for poor people, urban or rural, farmers, labourers, or in other occupations, and differing in varied ways, remains both significant and neglected. The earlier scenario remains largely valid and the dimensions identified probably remain the most important ones. There was, though, much that we underperceived or missed.

Linkages that interlock

Diagrams can make the points, or state the hypotheses, better than text. Three can illustrate ways of presenting, analysing and reflecting on, adverse linkages that do or may operate seasonally. Readers are challenged to draw their own and do better.

< Diagram to follow >

The first suggests five dimensions or domains – the body, food, resources, access and social relations. These combine seasonally to generate stress and powerlessness, to screw poor people down deeper into poverty and dependence. They can become irreversible ratchets, with children among the worst losers. The category ‘social relations’ is highly contextual and requires qualification more than the others: for one thing, mutual help and support in difficult times is found in many societies.

< Diagram to follow >

The second is a slight adaptation of a diagram used to postulate development as good change, from illbeing to wellbeing. It was an ahha! moment to realise that shifts in either direction can and do occur seasonally³. Material lack and poverty, physical weakness, powerlessness and vulnerability are all accentuated in the seasonal scenario, and conversely reversed towards wellbeing during early dry seasons. ‘Social relations’ again needs qualification, as does the experience of living and being.

< **Diagram to follow** >

The third is of unknown provenance but has been in my possession for perhaps 20 years⁴. It shows effects of three factors – food shortages, peak agricultural labour, and the rising incidence of some diseases, on women and children. It can be read together with this from Susan Schofield’s seminal article ‘Seasonal factors affecting nutrition in different age groups and especially preschool children’ (1974: 26-7):

‘Reallocation of female labour time (especially where energy expenditure is in excess of calorie supply) will have other effects. *Cooking practices* change, especially where quick easy-to-prepare meals (usually of the nutritionally poorer staples such as cassava) are produced once a day or in bulk and vitamins are destroyed by food kept simmering in the pot. *Intra-family distribution of food* is affected, where the children are asleep before the daily meal has been prepared and women have no time to either prepare special infant foods or effect the proper distribution of available foods. *Food gathering* may be inhibited so that some types of foods (e.g. green leafy vegetables) are suddenly excluded from the diet. *House-cleaning*, essential in overcrowded and insanitary conditions, may be inhibited. *Fuel and water* collection is constrained by lack of time. Finally mothers devote less time to *care* of their children who are often left in the charge of other siblings or elderly grandparents’

Dimensions easily overlooked

In the 1978 conference we thought we were being quite comprehensive, but subsequent reflection and evidence have indicated that there was much we missed or paid little attention to. As organisers we had backgrounds in agricultural economics (Longhurst), undisciplined social science (Chambers) and medicine and health (Bradley and Feachem). We had been led into the subject by an ahha! moment in an IDS seminar on rural Bangladesh when it was reported that late pregnancy and births peaked late in the monsoon, and Richard Longhurst, just back from a year and a half of fieldwork in Nigeria said that he had found the same there. So besides social, economic and health dimensions, demography was also a concern.

Now in this conference social protection and food security have moved centre stage. Neither of these terms was in use in 1978⁵. Other new subjects have also been identified or aised. Education (Hadley) is one, HIV another (Loevinsohn, Gillespie and Drimie). But the most fundamental is climate change affecting seasons (Jennings and Magrath; Mbiru, Angona and

³ The image that comes to mind is the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone, with its six monthly oscillation across the equator, regularly moving one way and then the other and carrying the same conditions with it.

⁴ If anyone can tell me who drew it, please do, I would like to acknowledge her (I am almost sure it was a woman).

⁵ In 1988, when Simon Maxwell put it to a meeting of IDS Fellows that he wanted to work on food security he was told authoritatively that food security was not a subject. He went on to set up a food security unit in IDS which at one time had over 10 members.

Komutunga; Davies and Tanner) , threatening radical changes for agriculture and possibly almost everything else.

The question can still be asked, and perhaps should always be asked – what else have we missed? What have we tended to overlook? The major point here is that with our professional specialisations, and our tendencies to research and write in and to our own disciplines, we miss the interlinkages that are so significant for those who live seasonal poverty and stress. Our training and incentive systems constrain us to be reductionist and so to miss the holism of the seasonal experiences of poor people. Agriculture, health and food links are vulnerable to oversight including failure to absorb nutrients in sickness.

Beyond this, there are other aspects of the lived experience of poor rural people that outsiders may miss: these may only affect a few, they may be erratic and one-off, they may be only evident to those who live them – accidents, animal sickness, disasters, funerals, powerlessness in bargaining, wet school uniforms and school attendance, cold, misery and missing work (see Appendix A Rainy Day), and theft of crops and livestock and precautions against theft. Yet another blind spote may be defecation and infection during the rains, perhaps rarely known by professionals and not appreciated by local people. And there are surely others treated in the papers which I have not mentioned.

To elaborate on these points about lived experience:

Accidents. Accidents can impoverish. To what extent they are seasonal, and during which seasons they are most common, is for investigation in each environment and for each gender and occupation. Three points can be made. First, rainy season conditions make people more vulnerable. Snake bite is one example. More generally, floods, landslides, and slipperiness can impact. The SDC Views of the Poor study in Tanzania reported of one community that for fetching water ‘The biggest problem is the terrain which is steep and slippery during the rainy season....people in the villages have had accidents carrying water’ (Jupp 2003: 36). Second, dealing with accidents is likely to be more difficult and impoverishing during the rains for reasons of access, money and cost, and failing to recover fully for lack of treatment. Third, the opportunity cost of labour can be high. As remarked by a Gambian villager to Margaret Haswell (1975:44) ‘Sometimes you are overcome by weeds through illness or accidents’.

Animal sickness. Animal sicknesses are seasonal. Participatory livestock research with pastoralists in Thiet, southern Sudan revealed what is reportedly a common pattern, with peaks in the latter rains, and a healthy period during the dry season. Median scores from groups of pastoralists’ analyses sum to

	Feb April	May-July	Aug- Oct	Nov-Jan
Rain	-	7	11	1
Cattle diseases	10	22	46	20
Biting flies, ticks, snails	6	41	38	13

Source: Conroy 2005: 65, The original gives a breakdown by disease and by vector

Disasters. The seasonality of disasters is so evident and obvious that it can pass unrecognised. When seeing how seasonal dimensions interlock as cyclical screws, it is easy to miss shocks which may not come every season, but to which people and communities are vulnerable at certain times of the year. In rural communities most of these are during the rains: floods, landslides, riverbank erosion, storm surges and high waves. Bangladesh has two cyclone seasons, one in early summer and the second in the late monsoon, the latter overlapping with the hard *monga* time (Salahuddin et al, and Neogi et al) for poor rural people. That also is when floods come: in 1988 two-thirds of Bangladesh's sixty-four districts experienced extensive flood damage in the wake of unusually heavy rains that flooded the river systems, leaving millions homeless and without potable water, and reportedly destroying about 2 million tons of crops, and making relief work difficult.

Funerals. To the extent that mortality is seasonal with a peak in the wet season⁶, the considerable costs of funerals in many cultures come at a bad time for those who are poorer, when money is short and the food required for ceremonies expensive. The opportunity cost of time and energy for those who take part is also often high, leading to loss of earnings for labourers and failure to weed and conduct other operations in a timely and adequate manner for small farmers. In Zimbabwe, attendance at funerals delayed planned activities for all six of the farmers in the study reported to this conference (Dorward, Galpin and Shepherd 2009: 1 and 8). If open defecation is the norm, the concentration of faeces, moreover more substantial because of the amount of food consumed, will raise the risks of infection⁷.

Powerlessness to bargain.

The normal view is that wages rise with demand and so should rise during labour peaks such as weeding and harvest. This may well be the general tendency, depending on conditions, but in most analysis bargaining power is omitted. Bargaining power is gendered to the disadvantage of women (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1999: 563-4). But all poor people can be affected. The authors the Bangladesh report for the Voices of the Poor wrote that

‘...Due to minimum food intake during crisis period, men and women cannot do labour-intensive work. Consequently they do not get proper wages from the employer in time’

implying that not only did they not get proper wages but that payment was also delayed. Paying labourers in kind at harvest has been a common form of cruel screw, leaving them hungry and vulnerable to debt when they have to work and prices are high, and paying them in food when it is abundant and cheap.

In South Africa I asked a student whose home was in a village in Malawi about the rains and the period before Christmas, mindful of the coincidence of the high expenditures of Christmas, a peak demand for agricultural labour, and the other interlocking factors of that time of year. He replied that before Christmas was a very good time. Labourers would do a standard amount of work on their family fields for only one kwacha. But after Christmas you

⁶ A peak in the rains was reportedly common but not universal in the late 1970s (Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey 1981: chapter 5: 135-162).

⁷ Immediately after funerals can be a good time to trigger community-led total sanitation precisely because there are so many excreta lying around (pers comm Sammy Musyoki) though not a good time if there is an agricultural labour peak then.

had to pay four kwacha for the same work. One can reflect on how desperate those labouring for so little must have been to earn enough for their families to be able to celebrate Christmas according to custom.

So, weak bargaining power when people are hungry or are known to need money badly , can depress wages, as in this lament from Malawi:

“..the problem is that these boat owners know that we are starving, as such we would accept any little wages they would offer to us because they know we are very desperate...we want to save our children from dying..” (Khaila et al 1999: 66).

The rains can be a good time for those with resources if they are bad enough for others.

School attendance. Many factors may weaken school attendance seasonally. These include priorities for agriculture and agricultural work, lack of money, hunger, and the timing of school fees (Hadley). There is also difficulty getting to school in heavy rain, sickness, getting wet and cold, damage to books and papers, shortage of money if that is required, and being unable to dry an only uniform (see box).

Box. Rain, clothing, cash and school attendance: Bertina Richard’s children

Bertina Richards, a single mother living with 6 of her children of whom 4 were of school age, in a high rainfall area in Jamaica, explained that only her eldest child had two uniforms. In their single roomed shack it was so difficult to dry clothes that if other children got soaked they had to be off school the next day or longer. Estimating days of school missed using ten bottle tops for each child, she gave these proportions and reasons for ten school days

			In school	Miss school	Reasons
Anne-Marie	14	One uniform Irons it each evening	9	1	Sick
Melissa	12	Two uniforms	6	4	No lunch money
Nickesha	10	One uniform	5	5	No lunch money Uniform gets wet
Beverley	7	One uniform	7	3	Uniform gets wet Lunch money not an issue

Interview, Cornwall Barracks, Jamaica 10 November 2000

Shelter. Shelter is not a topic in the book of the 1978 Conference⁸. But a participatory appraisal with very poor families in Tanzania (Jupp 2003) found that shelter was a higher priority for them than outsiders had supposed:

⁸ Housing is in the index but this refers only to conditions conducive to meningitis which is mainly a dry season disease.

‘Most of the rural study households had houses with grass thatch roofs in poor condition and leaking roofs were nearly always mentioned as one of the worst aspects of their lives...The urban households either had very old corrugated iron roofs which leaked badly or a crude ‘thatch’ of plastic bags and cardboard’

Problems of leaking and collapsing roofs, flooding, water and dampness within shelters and wet sleepless nights compound other stresses. The Malawi Voices of the Poor reported that the problem of collapsing houses made of mud and thatched with grass which could not withstand the heavy rains (Khaila et al 199:82). Also in Malawi having a house that did not leak was an indicator of wellbeing. A woman said that houses should not make people wake up and stand when it is raining like in a court when the judge is arriving and people say ‘*khoti liime*’- Court stand!’ (ibid 32). There are periods too of seasonal vulnerability to losing dwellings completely. Rivers changing course and flooding can destroy houses: when the Kosi river in Bihar floods and changes course, thousands are displaced; in Bangladesh many, perhaps most, of those in the slums of Dhaka are there because they have lost their land and/or houses to riverbank erosion with seasonal floods in the big rivers.

Theft. The seasonality of theft was not considered in 1978. Indeed in some regions theft was probably less significant then. Seasonal theft of food and animals has been found to be a significant experience and problem for small farmers and livestock keepers. In the Voices of the Poor study (Narayan et al 2000), when focus groups in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Malawi and Somaliland and Zambia used causal-linkage diagramming to identify their perceptions of causes of poverty, the two most common were health and theft: the theft of food is seasonal and it may be surmised that the same will be true of stock theft, whether large scale or petty. As Tariq Omar Ali (this conference) points out from his study in rural Bangladesh, there is a moral economy of petty pilfering of food crops and small amounts can be tolerated. However, he also reports people going to considerable lengths to protect their crops, camping in their fields and staying up all night, but that even this is not always effective. In Malawi, it is reported that in past years the custom was to crops in stores (on stilts to protect against rats) outside dwellings, but that this has been abandoned because of theft: crops are now stored inside.

Defecation behaviour and infection from faeces is a phenomenon which may have escaped notice. Defecation behaviour is seasonal and plausibly linked with vulnerability to diarrhoeas. In triggering Community-Led Total Sanitation (Kar with Chambers 2008) participatory mapping includes villagers putting yellow powder or sawdust on their social map on the ground to show where they defecate. Typically, this is around the edges of their settlement. When asked where they go at night during the rains, a common response is an emotional cocktail of embarrassment and laughter as they put the powder down right outside their own or their neighbours’ houses. When it is raining, especially when it is raining at night, people and children evicently and understandably defecate very close by their dwellings. Those most likely to do this will be those suffering from the urgency and pain of acute diarrhoeas. The liquid stools mix with the rainwater and may be trampled barefoot back into dwellings to infect others. It is then precisely when diarrhoeas are most common that behaviour is least hygienic and reinfections are most likely. This scenario will include when unlined pit latrines collapse during rains. In Bangladesh, they quite commonly collapse and become unusable during floods. A recent survey in Cambodia, has found that many people who use pit latrines during the dry season abandon them during the rains. Some of them go to the fields, dig a hole and bury their faeces. The reasons given by the researchers for disuse of latrines during the rains are: ‘dislike (presumably due to splashing problems); odour

problems; pit collapses; and a general feeling that the latrines were not hygienic during the rainy season' (pers. comm. Andy Robinson 2 May 2009).

Food absorption is another candidate for a neglected aspect of seasonality though it was mentioned in the 1981 book (Longhurst and Payne 1981: 46). Food absorption is reduced by diarrhoeas and other diseases. In his keynote address to the Third South Asia Conference on Sanitation in November 2008, M.S.Swaminathan stressed heavily that of the three 'As' of food – Availability, Access and Absorption – the last had been neglected. It is especially acute among sick infants and small children. Malnourished children are more vulnerable to diarrhoeal infections and have longer episodes, and a frequently quoted statistic is that 80 per cent of deaths from diarrhoeas are in children under the age of 5.

It is to be noted that the seasonality of urban deprivation appears to have been little studied. In urban slums there can be seasonal patterns of water and electricity supply, of security and violence, and of access. The Voices of the Poor study in Malawi (Khaila et al 1999: 79) found that the problem of poor roads was acute particularly during the rainy season. Big potholes had forced public and private transport operators to withdraw services. Women said this made their life unbearable: this was because they had to travel into town for their small-scale businesses. More generally, lack of waterproof shelter is perhaps the most pervasive problem.

To conclude, then, the interlocking of many factors point to the lean, hungry and sick seasons as the time when poor people are most likely to become poorer. Anirudh Krishna (appendix B) found this with sickness and related expenditures. His other research in five countries has consistently found that sickness, accidents and related expenditures are the most common proximate cause of people becoming poorer. In parts of Bangladesh, the worst season is *monga* (Salahuddin et al, and Neogi et al) a slack season in the middle of the rains and floods when there is little work. The Bangladesh Voices of the Poor study noted reports that many households from the *social* poor (not the very poorest) had sold their last piece of land during the slack season or had used it as collateral for getting a loan from moneylenders and then eventually lost it (in Nabi et al 1999: 37).

All this said, there is a danger of being carried away by a negative scenario, and of searching, as I have done, for evidence to justify the phrase *integrated seasonal poverty*. I was startled when I asked women in an Indian village what were the worst and best times of year. They said – the monsoon. That was when there was lot to do, a sense of urgency and purpose, and they enjoyed that. But then these were well built, healthy, strong women with good stone houses and by no means poor. It is the poor who live and know the seasonal integration of poverty and stress.

Professionals: season-proofed and season-blind

'Come let us mock at the wise;
With all those calendars whereon
They fixed old aching eyes.
They never saw how seasons run,
And now but gape at the sun'

W.B.Yeats Come let us mock at the great

Seasonal Biases

The interlocking biases against urban professionals perceiving seasonal rural deprivations during tropical rainy seasons have been repeated almost ad nauseam⁹: they prefer for many reasons to travel during the dry seasons when people are better fed, healthier, stronger and less stressed. Spatial and seasonal biases interlock: during the rains vehicles stick even more to tarmac than in the dry season, reducing contact with precisely those people who are most cut off and most likely to be suffering. Offsetting this, there are now as noted often more tarmac roads penetrating further into rural areas than there were; and helicopters, rare though they are and much mocked, are a means of offsetting seasonal and spatial biases, as by Geldof in the Ethiopian famine of the early 1980s¹⁰. But the biases remain.

There is a bias in international travel from Europe and North America. Those in cold climates north of the equator prefer to travel in their winter:

The international experts' flights
Fit northern seasons; winter nights
In London, Washington and Rome
Are what drive them in flocks from home

Indeed, in Bangladesh, such visitors from the North are known as *sheether pakhi* – winter birds who come in January to March. When the Select Committee on Overseas Aid of the British House of Commons wanted to visit India in the winter, the Indian authorities requested postponement as it was near the end of their financial year; but the convenience of the MPs prevailed and they went at what for many poor people in India was their least bad time of year – cool, relatively dry, healthy and after harvest.

Three other factors deter urban-based professionals from exposure to the multiple rainy season deprivations of poor rural people. The first is the incestuous 'capital trap' (Chambers 2006: 8-10) in which aid agency and Government staff have become increasingly ensnared, holding them fast in capital cities, accentuated by demands for harmonisation and policy influence, and career incentives. The second is reluctance to experience discomfort and embarrassment. The third is ethics: the argument is that it is unfair to take poor people's time or disturb them at a time of hardship and poverty of time and energy, when they need to be busy cultivating for their survival. These can be all be answered by pointing to the impacts of immersions (PLA 54) and the informed energy, anger and commitment that come from knowing first hand what poor people are suffering, and becoming personally aware of what seasonal deprivation means to them (Appendix A).

Our own institutional seasonality and how this relates to that of poor rural people has also been a relative blind spot¹¹. The effects of the fiscal year on the timing of government programmes and interventions have, to my knowledge, been little studied. In rural areas, authorities to incur expenditure are quite often not received until well into, sometimes half

⁹ For a recent reincarnation of this hoary topic see Chambers 2006: 23-5 and 31.

¹⁰ To be fair to Geldof, he also laboured on foot to reach a remote community.

¹¹ Aastha Khatwani is about to carry out a village based study in India, following the chains of fund releases upwards through the system, to learn more about how the fiscal year, administrative processes, and the seasonality of village life, fit or do not fit.

way through, the financial year. Then a crisis can come towards the end of a financial year with unspent funds which cannot be carried forward. This can then lead to a failure to spend optimally from a seasonal point of view.¹² It is surprising that this topic does not appear to have received much attention.

Unseen people – out of sight, out of mind

There is interlocking invisibility too of groups of people. These vary by occupation and environment. However, generically and across almost all environments and conditions, some of those most out of sight and out of mind are:

- Those who are socially and spatially marginalised in any community – not least those who are poorer, disabled, destitute and/or chronically sick.
- Older people of whom there are growing numbers.
- People who are poor, female and especially widows, young, ‘remote’ and mobile are not seen by many professionals and often not by the state. Neela Mukherjee (2009: 24) points to elderly women’s plight.
- Seasonal migrants, travelling in distress. They tend to be powerless, exploited and deprived, and their children and old people even more so. The children below 14 years of age involved in seasonal migrations in India are ‘a group that has not been on the radar screen of the government or development agencies’, a group for whom there are ‘no official data’ but that may be close to 9 million (Smita 2008: vii and 1). Migrants in India have until recently been unable to use their ration books in the places they go to, and suffer multiple insecurities - of housing, lack of social protection, vulnerability to abuse by the Police, and weak bargaining power for work and wages.

Missing in statistics

And statisticians too declare
They have a seasonal nightmare
An average is but a dream
With seasons means aren’t what they seem

To what extent health and other statistics have seasonal or counterseasonal biases, tending to over or under estimate bad things that happen at the worst times for poor people is a topic for a literature review and then research. It looks likely that the rainy season incidence of sickness will be understated in clinic and hospital statistics because not least of problems of access during rains, lack of cash, and the need to work. Indeed, as the Box below - Behaviour under rainy season stress, suggests, many factors may combine. Conversely, these are reversed once the rains are over. So statistics may understate for the rains and overstate for the early dry season after harvest.

¹² As a District Officer in Samburu District, Kenya, I tried to solve this problem by using unspent funds to buy cement just before the end of the financial year on March 31st. Unfortunately this was just before the onset of the rains, a time of seasonal vulnerability when cement could become an unusably hard currency.

Box: Behaviour under rainy season stress

This is a hypothetical question posed to participants in workshops. The question is

In the middle of the rains a poor rural family decides not to take their very sick child to the clinic 8 km (5 miles) away when, had it been the dry season, they would have taken the child. What are the possible reasons?

There are at least 17:

- One or both of the parents are themselves sick
- They are exhausted, weak and short of food and energy
- The mother is in late pregnancy or has just given birth [births tend to peak in the rains]
- Another of their children is sick
- With rain and cold the child would suffer on the journey
- They have no waterproofs, umbrella or big banana leaf
- Carrying a child in wet and slippery conditions is difficult, even dangerous
- There is no transport (bicycle rickshaw, minibus, bus) during the rains, or it is less reliable or costs more
- The opportunity cost of not working (especially weeding) is high
- It is difficult to ask neighbours to look after their other children because they are in the same state, and it would be asking more as the opportunity cost of their time too is higher
- They are short of cash and fear indebtedness
- The clinic staff may be charging more for drugs because in the rains demand exceeds supply
- The clinic is more likely to be out of drugs because of demand
- The clinic may not be open and they cannot know because people are not travelling bringing news
- There is a risk of not getting to the clinic or not being able to get back again (flash flood, landslide etc)
- Their shelter is damaged or has collapsed and needs repair
- Herbal remedies are more available in the rains

It may need only a few of these interlocking, or sometimes only one, to deter the parents.

All this said, there are honourable exceptions to lack of seasonal statistics. A UNDP Poverty Analysis Manual for Benin measures poverty by trimester and finds that in 1994/95 poverty ranged from 26 per cent in March to May to 43 per cent in September to November (Aho et al 1998: 160). The title of an IFPRI study Seasonal Undernutrition in Rural Ethiopia (Ferro-Luzzi et al 2001) speaks for itself. And there will surely be many others, besides the books listed below.

Missing in books

Since 1978 at least one journal and five books have been published with seasonality as a theme. The journal is the IDS Bulletin Seasonality and Poverty (1986) edited by Richard Longhurst. The books are David Sahn's edited volume Seasonal Variability in Third World Agriculture: the consequences for food security (1989), Martha Alter Chen's Coping with Seasonality and Drought (1991), Gerry Gill's Seasonality and Agriculture in the Developing World: a problem of the poor and powerless (1991), S.J.Ulijaszek and S.S.Strickland's edited

volume Seasonality and Human Ecology (1993), and most recently Stephen Devereux, Bapu Vaitla and Samuel Hauenstein Swan's Seasons of Hunger: fighting cycles of quiet starvation among the world's rural poor (2008). So seasonality has intermittently been the subject of books with a 15 year gap before 2008.

But there is an intriguing and perhaps important puzzle. Why, given its central significance in the lives of so many poor people, is seasonality so rarely mentioned elsewhere? It simply does not seem to be a category on many professionals' mental maps. Indexers may be one of these. In Michael Lipton's classic Why Poor People Stay Poor (1977) which predated the first seasonality conference in 1978, seasonality is not in the index. But I could not believe that Michael Lipton, who had lived almost a year in an Indian village, would have missed this, even though the book is about urban bias. And indeed on pages 243-4 he mentions that rural peaks of effort are likely to be required when food is scarce and expensive and he notes that sickness and shortage of food occur at the same time. So integrated seasonal poverty is there. But it is not indexed: it is not an analytical category. And other classics may well not mention seasonal linkages at all¹³. Taking them in chronological order, Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen in Hunger and Public Action 1989 are strong on interannual comparisons and droughts but the book has no index entries for disease, seasonality or sickness¹⁴. It is perhaps less remarkable that the dimension of seasonality is not to be found in Peter Townsend's The International Analysis of Poverty(1993) since his major work has been in the UK, or in Jeffrey Sachs's The End of Poverty (2005) given its broad generalisations. It is surprising though to find it also missing in four recent otherwise excellent works:

Paul Spicker et al Poverty: an International Glossary 2005 where it is not among the 27 entries under the letter S.

Paul Spicker The Idea of Poverty 2007

Duncan Green From Poverty to Power 2008

Potter, Binns and Elliott. Geographies of Development 2008 (except for entries for seasonal migration)

The last two have full sections on climate change but do not touch on the changes to seasonal patterns reported to this conference (Jennings and Magrath 2009; Mbiru, Angona and Komutunga 2009). And with climate change too, seasonal dimensions appear to have been late to be recognised by 'us' – professionals, though experienced by 'them' – in this case farmers.

Season-proofed and season-blind

Perhaps the deepest and most pervasive reason why we professionals underperceive seasonal poverty, suffering and stress is that we do not experience them. Our roofs do not leak. We have fans and air conditioners. We have tarmac and pavements to walk on. We drive in rainproof vehicles. We have umbrellas and raincoats. We do not have to cultivate in the rains. We have access to medical treatment. We have money. Season-proofed, we are season-blind.

¹³ This is a tentative generalisation. I cannot pretend to have combed these books from cover to cover.

¹⁴ Dreze and Sen include in their references Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty and later work by Longhurst, but I do not find this reflected in the content of the text. I should be glad to be shown that this is an oversight on my part.

The Opportunity: awareness and influence

Past neglect is present opportunity. It is precisely because seasonal dimensions have been so often overlooked or underperceived that they now present potential for pro-poor actions. Interventions in policy and practice will best come out of papers and brainstorming at the Conference. The question here is, rather, how to raise and sustain awareness of seasonality so that it is permanently and prominently on the agenda of policy and practice.

After the 1978 conference we faced the same challenge. IDS had no conventions about how this could be done. Our approach was so primitive I am embarrassed to confess it. Our IDS communications staff consisted of an editor and a person who managed the bookshop and mailings. We tried two things. First we crafted a letter and sent hundreds of copies (I recollect the figure of a thousand) through surface and airmail (there was no email or internet) to hundreds of Permanent or Principal Secretaries of Planning, Health and Agriculture in developing countries and to staff in aid agencies all over the world. There were at most five replies, three of which read as though they were from marginalised young foreign technical assistance staff or volunteers. The second strategy was the book. In the leisurely traditions of those days, this was only published (*mea culpa*) three years after the conference, despite prompt, diligent and creative work by Arnold Pacey, the principal editor. After a time it was out of print. At least one library disposed of its copy¹⁵.

Thirty years later we are in a transformed world. We have multi-media, a professional team and means of instant communication.

The big challenge is long-term, to raise *sustain* and *intensify* awareness how adverse factors interlink and how they affect poor and marginalised people. To this end, there will be actions during and following this conference, from blogs to videos to publications and other uses of the media. Here are some additional proposals:

Personal Experience

Making visits during the rains including immersions (pun regretted). These are stays of a few days and nights in a poor community, living and being with people, and experiencing some of their life. Dee Jupp's immersion (appendix A) is an example which brings to light, vividly and unforgettably, some of the multiple effects of heavy rain and the integration of the seasonal bad life¹⁶.

Analysis and presentation

PRA analyses by poor people themselves indicating how adverse and favourable conditions coincide and reinforce each other. These include facilitating PRA-type visual analyses by poor urban as well as rural dwellers, and sharing and discussing the resulting diagrams widely. Such diagrams should be available whenever there is a discussion of programmes or policy, whether at District or higher levels. This requires proactive commissioning and supply of such diagrams, whether by government or NGOs.

¹⁵ I purchased a secondhand copy through abe books. It had been remaindered by the library of a Cambridge College, having apparently been taken out once, in October 1981

¹⁶ The best recent collection on immersions is [Immersions: learning about poverty face-to-face, Participatory Learning and Action](#) 57 December 2007.

Diagramming to be more often a starting point and basis than words. The complexity of local experience and connections and linkages across dimensions, whether seasonal or not, can be better expressed visually than verbally. A diagram is far easier to inspect, analyse and discuss than are words, whether written or spoken. An example is the multi-dimensional seasonal calendars in use for Livelihoods Impact Analysis in Ethiopia (see Boudreau 2009:6).

Behaviour

Nominating one person at every policy meeting to reflect on seasonality and raise seasonal issues.

Alerting publishers requesting them to ask their indexers and members to be conscious of seasons and seasonality as categories, and contacting associations of indexers and their members, if such associations exist. Similarly alerting those who review books to look for seasonality, the absence of which can provide them with just the sort of critical comment they might like to make.

Monitoring mentions. Analysing reports and documents and word searching them to count the number of mentions of seasons and seasonality, and the context and comprehensiveness of those mentions.¹⁷

Asking questions. Being personally proactive, and encouraging others to do likewise, repeatedly asking questions about seasonal dimensions and realities – in committees, workshops, meetings....

Interrogating research proposals. For those who assess research proposals repeatedly asking about seasonal dimensions, and letting it be known that these will be assessed.

Sponsoring and encouraging research on many aspects of seasonality including

- Multidimensional linkages
- the seasonality of sickness having impoverishing ratchet effects .
- the relative pro-poor and anti-poverty cost-effectiveness of enabling people seasonally to avoid becoming poorer compared with, once they are poorer, enabling them to climb back up again

Compared with 1978 we have now in 2009 two advantages in putting and keeping seasonal dimensions of poverty on the map.

The first is social protection. In 1978 the term was not in currency. Now it is a commonplace of concern and policy. It is prominent in the contemporary seasonality discourse with much discussion of counterseasonal programmes (Hauenstein Swan, Vaitla and Devereux, 2008, 2009 and other papers to this conference) such as price-indexed cash transfers and food assistance and a social protection safety net including seasonal employment programmes. Social protection as a concept can be extended to transport infrastructure, access to markets, and livelihoods; and given the seasonality of sickness and the frequency with which seasonal sickness makes poor people poorer, effective, accessible and affordable health services can be recognised for what they are, a critical form of social protection.

¹⁷ Words used in a document can be counted using the programme wordl or by searching and counting on word through CTRL + H.

The second advantage ironically is climate change and its meteoric rise in priority and attention. The link between global warming and seasonal disruption and change presented to this conference combined with the renewed priority to agriculture presents a focus and concern that is likely to intensify. Climatic changes are immensely important in themselves and may be immensely damaging. But they also present an opportunity. If they can be used as an entry point to draw attention and resources to the many other aspects of seasonality that affect poor people – not least sickness, hunger, stress, and becoming poorer – these may then be better understood and mitigated or eliminated.

The recognised needs for social protection, and the realities of climate change, present an opportunity. Their seasonal aspects can be turned to good and sustainable effect to overcome and offset professional season-blindness. They can help to draw attention to the many other interlocking dimensions of integrated seasonal poverty and the imperative for sensitive and well informed policies and practice to tackle them.

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Appendix A: Dee Jupp: A Rainy Day

On the third day of my five day stay with a poor family in rural Bangladesh, the heavens open. It rains hard and continuously for more than 24 hours and life for 'my' family comes to a standstill. Rain in Dhaka is a nuisance: the drains overflow, traffic grinds to a halt and unpleasant smells permeate the air. Rain in the village is something else and I had never realized before living this for myself just how big an impact it has.

'My' family live in a one roomed bamboo and CI sheet house. The rain pounds on the tin roof relentlessly. The bamboo walls soak up the rain and sweat dampness. The father (Ali), a rickshaw driver, is unable to work all day. One days income lost means that he buys 5kg less rice this week. His wife (Salma) works in the garment industry some five miles away. There was no way she could miss a day at the factory so she leaves home at 6am and paddles through the rain, works her ten hour shift in the dry clothes she had carried with her and then returns home in her wet ones. She shivers all evening and starts sneezing and snuffling next morning. Their three children, two girls and a boy are aged between 2 and 7 years. The eldest attends a government school one and a half miles from home. She usually walks to school in bare feet with her friend but there was no way she could go this day. So she stays with her two siblings and their father cooped up in the house all day. They have no warm clothes. The outside stove was soaked and unusable and so there is no cooked food to be had. The four of them eat handfuls of moori (dried puffed rice) periodically throughout the day. At night, we can't go out to use the toilet – I don't know what they did but I had to resort to a bottle. It is very cold... a cold I have never, in 22 years of Bangladesh experience, ever felt before.

We play games, sing songs, read books together but the novelty of having the bideshi (foreigner) play Incy Wincy Spider over and over soon wears off. We simply have to sit out the rain. Cooped up together in 200 square feet, it is unsurprising that we all succumb to Salma's cold.

I am due to leave soon... back to Dhaka and the inconvenience of waterlogged streets and the comfort of my Echinacea tablets. 'My' family, meanwhile, will take several days to recover from the rainy day.

Dee Jupp
November, 2008

Appendix B Dreading the Monsoon: Seasonality in Poverty Creation

Kothari Bai has strong feelings about the monsoon season. “On the one hand, when it rains our crops get nourished. But no work is available at that time, and there is more need for money.” Wage employment is hard to find in July and August in southern Rajasthan. Those whose livelihoods depend upon receiving a daily flow of wages face a particularly hard time during the monsoon season.

Throughout the year, seasons rule the tempo of life in this village. Many people migrate to nearby Gujarat to work as casual labor. For those who stay behind, children, the elderly, and women, the monsoon season represents the hardest time of the year. Food supplies, stored from the previous harvest, are at their lowest point. Those who left to work in Gujarat have not yet returned, bringing back their savings. With money and food supplies simultaneously running low, families survive by borrowing small or large amounts from local moneylenders. Interest on these loans is calculated at rates ranging from two percent to ten percent monthly, with the poorest borrowers having to pay the highest interest rates.

Seasonal illnesses peak at the time of monsoon. Water-borne diseases, such as diarrhea and gastro-enteritis, and others, such as malaria, are most prolific soon after the monsoon showers begin to fall. Additional expenses on account of health care add to the financial burdens of cash-strapped families. Further loans are taken out to pay for health care costs. Quite often, future labor power is pledged against these loans, initiating a cycle that ends in debt peonage for many.

According to one moneylender, Ram Kishore, who lives in Kothari Bai’s village, requests for new loans are most frequent in July and August. Distress sales of families’ assets also peak during these months. Low cash reserves and emergency expenses combine to deplete the meager pools of assets that poor families possess.

Many families have fallen into chronic poverty in this village. Of the total of 111 households who live here, 16 households make up the category of the newly impoverished. They were not poor ten years ago, but they are desperately poor at the present time. Not all of them fell into poverty during the monsoon season. Indeed, it is hard to say when exactly they moved across this categorical divide. Unlike statisticians, ordinary people do not think of poverty in terms of some sharply-drawn dividing line. Nor is it any single event that usually pitches people into poverty. More often, descents into poverty occur over longer periods of time, the result cumulatively of a succession of negative events.

Among the events that contributed to descents into poverty in Kothari Bai’s village, ill health and high health care costs are most prominent. For a study that I conducted, a random sample of eight households was selected from among all 16 households who fell into poverty in this village. Interviews conducted with multiple household members helped reconstruct detailed event histories, revealing the nature of negative events that were experienced by these households. On average, three negative events were experienced in each such case.

Two-thirds of all negative events involved illnesses, injuries, deaths from diseases, and high health care costs. The onset of some of these ailments, such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and tuberculosis is hard to date precisely. In other cases, the interviewees were more forthcoming about these dates.

Nearly one-half of all related health incidents (7 of 16) commenced or became acute at the time of the monsoons. Kiladevi's 18-year-old son, Ramesh, who went out in the dark to rescue some cows from a rising stream, accidentally stepping upon a live high-power cable set loose by the heavy storm. He was instantly paralyzed on one side of his body and died six weeks later, but not before Kiladevi's entire savings were exhausted by medical costs. Gokalnath, a 60-year old man, fell ill for the first time in his life after drinking contaminated water brought home from a nearby pond. Three years later, he died, reportedly on account of a stomach ulcer. His widow, Tulcchi Bai, had to sell their small agricultural holding in order to meet the doctors' demands for cash. Ramjilal's wife died during the monsoon season. She was carrying their third child. Complications developed after she was bitten by mosquitos. Because the river, normally dry, could not be easily crossed, especially by a mortally ill woman in her eighth month of pregnancy, Ramjilal arranged, at great expense, for a qualified nurse to be brought across. But fate intervened before the nurse could arrive. The expense was to no avail. Other negative events followed. Ramjilal, like Tulchhi Bai, is desperately poor at the present time.

Floods caused by an unnaturally heavy rainfall destroyed the low-lying fields that Chaturbhuj had patiently nurtured over the previous ten years. As he frantically attempted to repair the breach in the low mud wall, one of his pair of oxen was carried away by the fast-flowing flood. Two years later, Chaturbhuj died, strangely enough during the monsoon season. Although his worsening heart condition had hardly anything to do with the rains, his widow, Kothari Bai, continues to have strong feelings about the monsoon season.

Those who have remained persistently poor narrated similar stories about how suffering due to respiratory diseases, such as asthma and chronic bronchitis, became more pronounced during the months of monsoon. Long-lingering diseases are more acutely experienced after the rains begin to fall. Doctors and healers have to deal with their heaviest patient loads during this season. Cattle deaths are also more frequent at the time of monsoon. Despite the efforts that poor and near-poor families make through the rest of the year, setbacks suffered during the monsoon tend to perpetuate poverty.

Anirudh Krishna
August 2006
