

Rural poverty in developing tropical countries has a seasonal dimension. There is a simultaneous prevalence of sickness, malnutrition, indebtedness, hard work, discomfort and poor food availability at certain times of the year, usually during the rains. This period before harvest — ‘the hungry season’ — is one of considerable stress for rural people, exacerbating their poverty. Poor people are less able to cope with this regular period of stress than rich people, who can usually exploit it to their benefit. The difficulties and stress experienced on a seasonal basis are, of course, anticipated by poor rural people: they are a regular event to be navigated each year. There are different ways of coping — of moving resources around — in ways that relate to productive activities and social and demographic mechanisms. Some of these mechanisms are described in this *Bulletin*. In calling this issue ‘Seasonality and Poverty’, the focus is on how seasonality affects poor people, how they respond to it and how development can assist them in the face of these stresses.¹

The seasonal problems of rural people vary between different environments. They relate to the nature of the local ecology and natural rhythms of plant and animal growth, local production and income-generating activities and cultural patterns. The reaction of individuals and communities in pastoral areas will vary compared to those of, for example, communities of cultivators. The overall wealth of a community or a family could lift them above or depress them below the critical level of livelihood which determines whether seasonal stress leads to

constraints, preventing families from meeting subsistence needs without some loss of function. The many and varied environments in which seasonal influences operate are also described in the *Bulletin*.

Seasonal stresses are not the only contingency faced by rural people and although regular, may be less severe than the irregular unanticipated problems created by variations in food and employment availability between, rather than within years. Two or three poor years of food production can often lead to famines, as seen recently in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. A third even more spasmodic and random contingency can be that which strikes individual families in the form of a sudden death, an accident incapacitating working members or a huge, although generally expected, expenditure such as for a wedding or birth naming ceremony. When these contingencies overlap, as they can do for families at a certain stage in its life cycle, inhabiting areas that are drought prone, then the family is likely to be driven into deep impoverishment.

The context in which seasonal factors influence economic development is clearly as important as the nature of those seasonal forces. The contingencies described above broaden seasonality beyond a narrow definition and place it within this wider context. The way in which people respond to stress and its corollary — how development and policy can strengthen people’s ability to withstand stress — requires this wider definition. This suggests three levels of analysis to seasonal problems, especially within conditions seen today in sub-Saharan Africa. These involve the examination of relationships between first, different types of seasonal patterns and the importance of particular types of significant elements; second, regular patterns and irregular bad years which throw regular seasons out of gear, and third, regular seasonal fluctuations and those underlying the economy such as long-term declines in food production, availability of able-bodied workers in rural areas, degradation of the environment, erosion of common property resources and so on.

¹ The papers in this *Bulletin* are developed from an IDS conference held at Stafford House, Hassocks, Sussex on 13-15 February, 1985, and organised by Robert Chambers, Richard Longhurst and Jeremy Swift. Acknowledgement is due to those attending the workshop for contributions to the discussion and conclusions. They were Caroline Allison, David Butcher, Robert Chambers, Alison Evans, Catharine Geissler, Gill Gordon, Patrick Hardecastle, Ced Hesse, Janice Jiggins, Colin Leakey, Michael Lipton, Richard Longhurst, Penelope Nestel, Clare Oxby, Claudia Pendred, Sara Randall, David Sahn, Jeremy Swift, Camilla Toulmin and Cynthia White.

The need to develop the links between seasonality *per se* and the other processes of impoverishment has been reinforced by the experience of policy-makers and researchers since the conference on Seasonality held at IDS in 1978 pulled together case studies and focused thinking more intensively on seasonal issues [Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey 1981]. Policy-makers do regard seasonal phenomena and the inter-relationships between them as too important to ignore, and believe that resources applied to alleviating seasonal hardship would bring considerable benefits. The argument for seasonality-related interventions has often revolved around one of cost effectiveness: that resources applied at specific times of year will be more effective than strategies that exist all year round, and that raising people above the seasonal threshold will remove a constraint that will encourage self sustaining growth.

In proposing this argument it has sometimes been difficult to see how interventions could be successfully timed — switched on and switched off — in locations where the administration of programmes and projects is always difficult and where withdrawing services and resources would be unacceptable to all concerned. Some interventions of this type are feasible and include selective use of public works, services related to specific farming operations and timing of education services. But generally the subject now needs to be approached from the point of view of influencing existing policies by seeking to incorporate an element that will cope with seasonal stress — by spreading it out, reducing it or by strengthening buffers that exist to counter its worst effects. This approach — to ‘season proof’ development policy — inevitably leads into more demanding research and policy territory, but avoids the danger of relegating seasonality to an interesting but intractable phenomenon.

Three themes in the *Bulletin* appear of importance to the editor, with no apologies made for their obviousness. The first is that already mentioned: poor rural people have means of coping — up to a point — with stress from expected seasonal events and contingencies. The nature of these individual and household level strategies is mentioned or described in detail for different parts of the world in nearly all of the articles in the *Bulletin*. This frequency of examination of such strategies is important because policies should build on what people do already if poverty — seasonal or general — is to be reduced.

Second, the ownership of assets is an important means of remaining independent of seasonal stress. Their sale (or mortgaging) is a major instrument used by people to cope but in so doing they run the severe risk of becoming poorer as a result. Asset sale leads to further accentuation of the unequal distribution of resources.

What assets are important is obvious in most cases, less so in a few others. In physical form, they include land, livestock, crops in store, dung, trees, household implements and jewellery; social assets include membership of occupational groups and foodsharing networks. People make use of other resources by diversifying income sources, often by intensive use of natural resources. The wide range of uses made by people of plants, trees, livestock and other animals is evident in several articles. The natural environment provides many seasonal buffers. Conservation of natural resources and measures to reconstitute assets after sale — or better to avoid sale in the first place — are important.

Third, to counter seasonal poverty we must continue to take a firmly interdisciplinary line and to exploit the linkages that exist between our knowledge of natural resources, economic phenomena and social relationships. Rural people look at seasons in a holistic manner and so there is no reason why professional outsiders should not do the same.

The bias in the *Bulletin* is towards articles that refer to sub-Saharan Africa, but many carry important implications for development in other parts of the world, Michael Lipton, for example, reviews his research on the poor and ultra poor from a seasonal perspective and shows that reaction to seasonality is one of many variables which distinguishes these two groups. Differences exist in labour force behaviour, demographic structure and asset and land characteristics. The ultra poor do have more unstable diets seasonally than their poor counterparts; in terms of labour supply, fluctuations are greatest for the poor and the wage rate falls and fluctuates in a most damaging way for them. Janice Jiggins examines the means whereby women cope with seasonality, reminding us that there are considerable differences within households in terms of suffering from seasonality and response to it. Experience suggests that harmful effects are often handed on from men to women. Attention is drawn to the resilience of women’s social networks.

The two studies from the Sahel, by Camilla Toulmin among the Bambara of Central Mali and Cynthia White on the WoDaaBe in Niger examine strategies adopted by those pastoral communities in response to seasonality. Toulmin emphasises the importance of off-farm income sources and also shows how larger households are more able to withstand the negative effects of seasonality. White shows how large-scale animal losses by families in bad years used to be made up, but new forms of development have made pastoralists more vulnerable. As a result permanent impoverishment can follow but policies could be designed to mitigate this. Richard Longhurst reviews

the household food security strategies adopted by households, with particular reference to northern Nigeria. Such strategies include crop diversification and mixed cropping approaches, the building up of stores such as body fat, small stocks, and grain, short or long-term migration, and the development of social contracts between families and communities. The way in which these seasonal strategies are extended in the face of famine conditions is shown for other parts of the world, including Rajasthan in India.

The research efforts of natural scientists often ignore seasonal factors. The crops, trees and agricultural systems that are encouraged often do not help people in meeting seasonal food supplies. Colin Leakey proposes a revival of thinking along the lines of life forms in relation to adapting to different climates and hence seasonal production of biomass. On the same theme Chambers and Longhurst show how trees have been ignored as important seasonal buffers for the poor: as sources of food, forage and incomes. Yet it is clear that they play essential roles in alleviating seasonal hardships.

The extent of migration as another seasonal buffer is described in several articles. Gill Gordon's case study from Ghana shows the impact of migration on child nutrition and health which previous work has shown to be seriously affected by seasonal changes. She makes suggestions for primary health care measures which can provide for better child health in the wet season.

The final article on the implications of seasonal factors for research and policy indicates the need to think carefully about location and target groups. Seasonality needs to be integrated into development policy, but a fair amount of 'fine tuning' will be required so that people do not become impoverished either by seasonal influences or by the very policies that are designed to help them.

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Reference

Chambers, R., R. Longhurst and A. Pacey (eds.), 1981, *Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty*, Frances Pinter, London