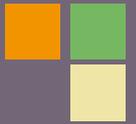




Seasonality Revisited

Perspectives on Seasonal Poverty



Seasonality Revisited

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**Addressing Monga through a
collective regional forum response
in the northwest of Bangladesh**

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Addressing *Monga* through a collective regional forum response in the northwest of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Monga, is a well-known in the language of development in Bangladesh. Poor farmers and labourers in the northwest region of Bangladesh suffer from a lack of employment opportunities during the months of September to November. Such a situation increases the vulnerability of households who are already at risk.

This paper aims to document the story of a regional effort to address the stress placed on livelihoods that is caused by issues of seasonality. *Monga* has been addressed by government and other development agencies from the perspective of emergency management through the development of safety-net programs. Recently, however, regionally active agricultural research and development agencies have collectively tried to address the issue through a set of innovative technologies interventions, coupled with capacity building and dissemination activities. A concept of a Focal Area Forum emerged under a project named PETRRA (Poverty Elimination through Rice Research Assistance) to support collective action by all actors in the field of agricultural research and development. PETRRA was managed by the International Rice Research Institute in close partnership with the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute. The actors included the government agencies (Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute, BRRI, Bangladesh Institute for Nuclear Agriculture, Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation), Non-government organisations (RDRS, GKF & others) and private sector enterprises. RDRS was nominated as the secretariat for the forum with the director of agriculture of RDRS as the member-secretary. It was agreed that the heads of other regional agencies would chair the forum by rotation. The members collectively decided to share resources so as to be able to develop and implement programs without the need for major resource support from donors. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between RDRS and the DAE to support each other; RDRS groups and Farmer Field School (FFS) groups were used by the DAE to disseminate the latest region specific proven technologies. Other agencies such as BARI, BRRI, BADC and BINA cooperated as resource persons for poor farmer capacity development programs on selected technologies. This simple understanding created a huge potential of multi-agency cooperation to address a major regional issues. The MoU was endorsed by the highest decision making authority. Many national agencies showed their interest to work closely with the Northwest Focal Area Forum to address the *monga* issue. This paper explores the potential of such a strategy for regional development. The paper also explores possibility of replication of such an effort nationally and in similar environments internationally.

Key Words: Seasonality; Regional Forum; Collective Development; Agricultural Research and Development; Poverty; Bangladesh; South Asia.

The problem of *monga*: an example of chronic entitlement¹ failure

The intensity of *monga* has decreased during the last three decades. The introduction of *boro* rice (irrigated winter rice) during the 1970s was a breakthrough that could eliminate one critical month of *monga* during March-April (*Chaitra-Baishakh*). The harvest period of *boro* provided enough work for poor people. It was a positive impact of the green revolution.

However, the second period of *monga* which is from mid-September through to mid-November (*Ashwin-Kartik*) has been the most critical for poor farmers and day labourers. There was insufficient work locally. The consequences have been enormous, starvation, malnutrition, migration, distress sales of household assets, the advanced selling of labour and the taking of loans at high interest. These reflect desperation. The affected area has been ecologically one of the most vulnerable regions of Bangladesh. It includes the five districts of Rangpur, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha. The problems in the region have been doubly complicated by the poor natural resource-base that has poor soils and suffers from river erosion and flooding (see Annex 1 for a map of the *monga* region).

Monga, a local Bangla term, is used to describe famine-like situation in northwest Bangladesh during which the poor suffer from acute deprivation caused by the lack of purchasing power. It has been defined as:

... a seasonal food insecurity in ecologically vulnerable and economically weak parts of north-western Bangladesh, primarily caused by an employment and income deficit before *aman*² is harvested. It mainly affects those rural poor, who have an undiversified income that is directly or indirectly based on agriculture (Zug 2006:2).

Rahman (2007) distinguished four critical faces of vulnerability. He described *monga* as i) 'a problem of entrenched seasonal poverty affecting primarily agriculture labour-dependent households'; ii) 'a persisting problem of pockets of ecological vulnerability – river erosion, flood-prone, sandy soil'; iii) a seasonal vulnerability that varies from year to year and contextual factors such as 'timing of excessive rain in August-early September and the robustness of the preceding *boro* crop'; and iv) 'an overall problem of higher-than-national average level of poverty manifested in high landlessness and low diversity of livelihoods'.

Monga is now an important term in the development and political vocabulary in Bangladesh. Some people credit the media with attracting the attention of the government and the donors to *monga* (Zug 2006).

Monga Responses

There have been a range of government and non-government *monga* mitigation initiatives. These have been vulnerable group feeding (VGF), vulnerable group development (VGD), enterprise development, skill development training, special micro-credit program, relief and food for work (FFW). Success was limited due to poor coordination or linkages to the market. In such

¹ Sen, Amartya (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. ILO, Oxford University Press. New York.

² *Aman* is the rice grown in the monsoon season.

responses the development of sustainable infrastructure has been the greatest challenge (Rahman 2007).

The PETRRA³ project had commissioned as many as 11 (out of 45 total) rice-based research and development projects in the region to combat the problem through developing appropriate technologies and extension methods to combat the seasonal and chronic poverty. Besides commissioning R&D projects PETRRA also facilitated the establishment of a Focal Area Forum that could mobilise all actors active in the region in the field of agricultural R&D and maximize the benefit for small and marginal farmers and on-farm labourers. These are the groups most affected by *monga*.

During the life of the project PETRRA (1999-2004) had begun to mobilise project and non-project partners of the region to up-scale available technologies and extension methods through using locally available human, physical and financial resources. At the end of the project there was an established forum committed to experimentation and dissemination of pro-poor technologies. There was a MoU between DAE (government extension agency) and RDRS (an NGO) to ensure a government and civil society partnership for regional development. While RDRS was entrusted as the permanent secretariat, the regional head of BRRI was the first chair of the forum. The minister endorsed the forum and under the MoU cooperation continued to unfold (Van Mele et al 2005).

Early experiments in collective strategies for interventions in agriculture

The Focal Area Forum concept was first developed, nurtured and experimented with under the PETRRA project. The concept development process was conceived as the PETRRA-PMU was drafting its project exit plan. It was recognised that within a given region there were a range of government institutions, NGOs and private sector agencies that together could ensure a greater impact of agricultural research and development (R&D) for resource-poor farmers. Through a forum it would be possible to bring research and delivery organizations closer to their clients (PETRRA 2000 and PETRRA 2000a). The justification for such a forum was:

- Many activities are ongoing in the regions which are very relevant for poor farmers but are not known to relevant actors;
- There is a National Agriculture Extension Policy⁴ (NAEP) that gives legitimacy to actors working together;
- Such a forum can help develop communication and linkage among actors;
- Consistent knowledge on innovations and their movements can be ensured through forum networks;
- Raising the voice of resource-poor men and women would be easier through GO-NGO extension agents;
- Advocacy and gender issues could be addressed through such a forum;

³ The PETRRA project was implemented in Bangladesh with funding from DFID during 1999-2004. The project was managed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) with close cooperation from Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI).

⁴ New agricultural extension policy (enacted in 1996); this encourages actors to work with the existing farmer groups instead of individual farmers. As the government extension agency DAE does not organise farmer groups they could easily use NGO-organised groups to disseminate technological information.

- Joint capacity development activities for farmers and field workers could be easier through such a forum; and
- Sharing human, physical and financial resources according to each agency's provision for common cause could facilitate collective activities where all could share their due credit.

Initially the PETRRA Project Management Unit did not have a clear idea of its potential role in facilitating a focal area forum. For the PMU the commitment was to help actors discover an effective way of working together that ensured more direct research and development impact for the resource-poor farm households. PETRRA wanted to bring together actors with potential for impact regardless of whether it was a government or a non-government agency. This was new territory for IRRI as it had traditionally worked with government agencies only. PETRRA decided to be open and experiment with different alternatives in three different regions of Bangladesh. These were the northeast, the southwest and the northwest.

In the northeast the leadership was tried with the District office of the government Department of Agriculture Extension. The frequent transfer of district government extension officers meant the DAE providing the facilitating leadership was problematic. A regional NGO, Friends in Village Development (FIVDB) was also approached but the leadership within the organization for agriculture meant they were not ready to give such leadership. Later another agricultural NGO, Agricultural Advisory Society (AAS) was asked to take the lead. AAS was not from the region but through PETRRA has excellent work in the region. However its presence was dependent on projects and it did not have a long-term presence. From this perspective it was not a good choice.

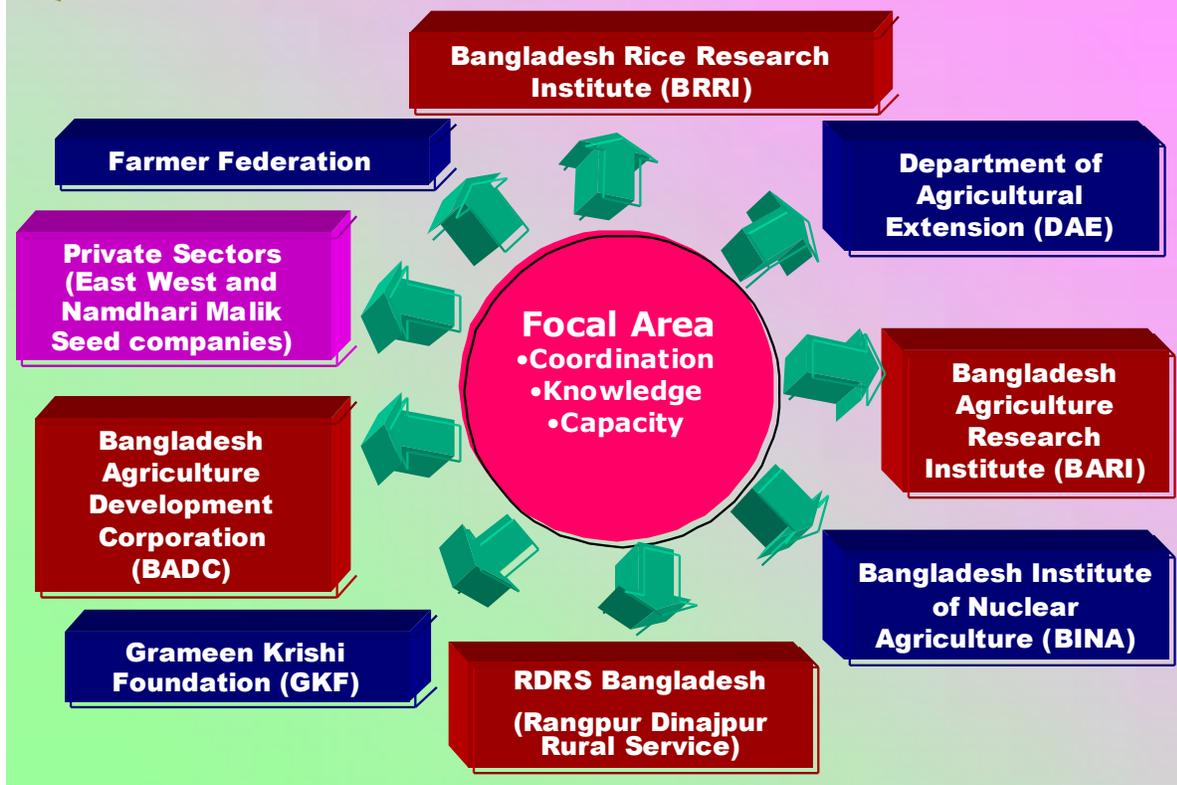
In the southwest the BRRRI regional office was approached to take the lead but the local head of BRRRI did not take up the challenge. As the activity it was not part of the head's 'official' mandate and as such was not obligated. Within a government agricultural research institution like BRRRI success in a regional station is very dependent on the motivation of the individual. The response in the southwest contrasted with the northwest.

It was the northwest region that responded to the focal area forum concept. A factor that was essential for such a forum was the existence, interest, initiative and leadership of a regional actor that could take the role of host.

Northwest Focal Area Forum sets an example of effective strategy

The northwest focal area forum was formally established in 2002 after one year of discussions and meetings with all actors active in the region in rice and agricultural research and development related activities. Members included: farmer representatives (men and women) from federations, government agencies (DAE, BRRRI, BINA, BADC, BARI), and NGOs (RDRS & GKF), private sector seed production and marketing agencies (East West Seed and Namdhari Malik Seed) (see figure 1 below). RDRS was entrusted as the secretariat and it was decided that each agency will chair the forum by rotation.

Fig 1. North West Focal Area Forum, Bangladesh



Source: Adapted from RDRS 2004:7

The Northwest Focal Area Forum articulated four objectives (Van Mele et al, 2005):

- *Movement of knowledge on rice-based innovations:*
Under this program the members disseminated PETRRA identified suitable technologies for the regions such as Brridhan28 and Brridhan29⁵, LCC⁶ dissemination and capacity building for its use and the RDRS federation model for seed uptake (Samsuzzaman and Van Mele 2005). The forum used the RDRS organized Farmer Field Schools, majority were female groups for technology dissemination. Availability of consistent knowledge has been a big challenge for extension agents as often they would receive a different version of recommendations from different agencies and even from different divisions within the same agency.

A second set of innovations focused on *monga* mitigating technology. The forum introduced a short duration rice variety Brridhan33 and a direct seeded planting method. RDRS, BIRRI, BRDB and two other NGOs (TMSS & USS) in the region jointly

⁵ *BRRIDhan28* and *BRRIDhan29* are two modern winter rice varieties developed by BIRRI and were adapted as suitable varieties for the region under PETRRA-supported and RDRS-led seed uptake project.

⁶ Leaf Colour Chart is a simple diagnostic plastic tool used to understand nitrogen need in rice plant; it was initially developed at IRRI but adaptive research was conducted in Bangladesh under PETRRA.

implemented the program under the leadership of the forum. The program was funded by Research Initiative Bangladesh (RIB). IRRI under the Irrigated Rice Research Consortium (IRRC) engaged with the focal area forum. In 2006 IRRI with some of the local NGO partners of Inter Cooperation (SOLIDARITY, USS, GAUS, SEED), researched and further refined the *monga* mitigating technology through a package of technologies that comprised direct seeded BRRIDhan33 (Mazid *et al.* 2009). The technology and its refinements have been highly endorsed by all concerned. Since its introduction it has proved to effectively generate employment for poor households through the labour required for early harvesting. The table below explains the technology by comparing with existing cropping patterns. The technology and the approach taken by the NW focal area forum were widely accepted. It has since become a national program of the government and has been implemented by many more agencies and groups within and beyond the forum (RDRS & NW Focal Area Forum 2007). Neogi, a co-author of this paper in his interview, claimed that in one location there was no incidence of *monga* in 2008 due to the success of an initiative that brought 40,000 ha of land under the cultivation of BRRIDhan33. The DAE through its program was responsible for the largest area of adoption.

Recently IRRI with RDRS has become engaged with the focal area forum in the testing and dissemination of stress tolerant rice varieties.

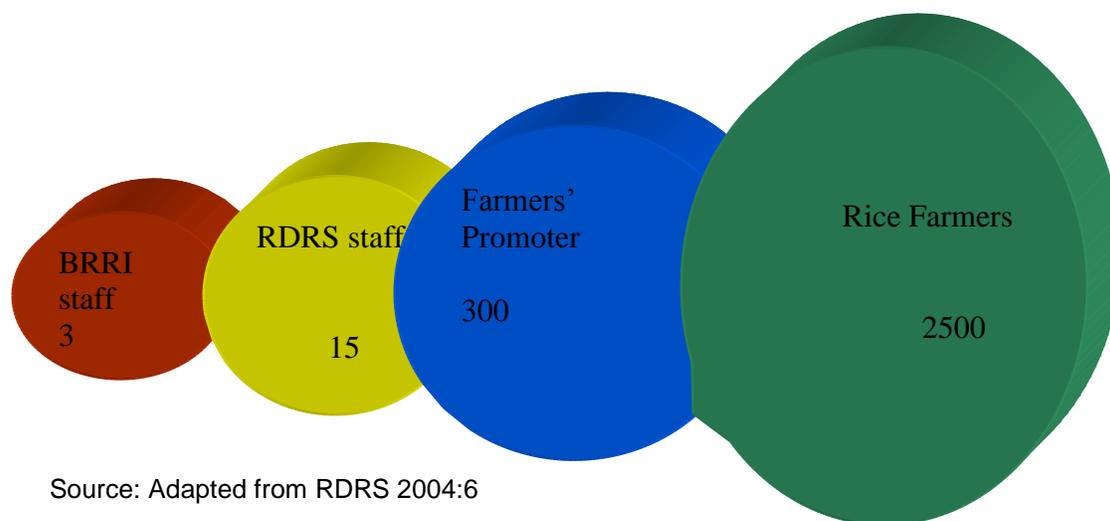
Table 1: Existing 7 different cropping patterns practiced by farmers in northern Bangladesh

| Sl. No | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|--------|--------|-----------|-----|------|-------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|
| 1 | | Boro rice | | | | | | | Aman | Rice | | |
| 2 | | Tobacco | | | | | | | Aman | Rice | | |
| 3 | | Maize | | | | | | | Aman | Rice | | |
| 4 | Potato | | | | Maize | | | | Aman | Rice | | |
| 5 | | Wheat | | | | | | | Aman | Rice | | |
| 6 | Potato | /W. Veg | | | Jute | | | | Aman | Rice | | |
| 7 | Potato | | | late | Boro | | | | Aman | | | |

Cropping pattern for *Monga* mitigation

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--------|--|------|------|--|--|--|--------|--|--------|--|
| | Potato | | Mung | | | | | Direct | | Potato | |
| | | | | | | | | seeded | | Potato | |
| | Potato | | Late | Boro | | | | Direct | | | |
| | | | | | | | | seeded | | | |
| | | | | | | | | Rice | | | |

- *Developing capacity of the farmers and field workers:*
 The forum decided to develop capacity of farmers on the above tested technologies on a large scale through GO-NGO field workers. The forum utilised the existing human resources from BRRRI and RDRS through first organizing a training of trainers (ToT) for the field workers and then training RDRS-led FFS farmer promoters who in turn trained farmers. The model of training that was tested in 2004 under PETRRA is presented in the figure below.



Source: Adapted from RDRS 2004:6

This approach of dissemination and training was highly appreciated by the government and was duly endorsed. The state minister for agriculture instructed the DAE to work closely with the forum and to extend all necessary support for training and technology support for NGO-organised farmer groups (FFS). A MoU was signed immediately after the instruction which remains valid until today (even after the change of the government in 2009) (Van Mele *et al.* 2005; DAE-RDRS 2004).

It is interesting to note that DAE field staff are being trained by RDRS, BRRRI and DAE senior officers as field level technical persons with the responsibility to provide training for poor farmers who have been organized in FFSs and federations by RDRS. This arrangement of GO-NGO collaboration in the region does not exist in other regions of Bangladesh.

The PETRRA-PMU played a crucial role here. The PMU asked questions at strategic times on sustainability and encouraged each local initiative in which members took the lead. The PMU attended the different meetings as facilitators and observers. Their focus was on the focal area form finding its own niche in the regional setting. The forum was an example of decentralized decision making (Magor and Salahuddin 2009).

– *Seed:*

Seed was another important area in which the forum worked together. For farmers, access to quality seed of recommended varieties was a high priority. To date this has involved the replication of a RDRS developed federation-led seed production and marketing model to a further 18 federations. The model ensures the availability of quality at the door-step of poor farmers at an affordable price. This is in an environment in which only 15 percent of the total demand of quality seed comes from the formal sector. Other seed actors also wanted to be partners of the forum as it meant they could participate and share proper information on varietal demand. Within the forum a regional seed network that involved the federations, BADC and private sector producers was established.

– *Voice:*

Within the Focal Area Forum there have been several strategies for hearing, accommodating and responding to the voice of resource-poor households. Firstly, men and women representatives of farmer federations were made active members. They regularly participate in the meetings and represent farmer concerns and demands and are in a position to give suggestions. Secondly, resource-poor farmers directly participate, guide and evaluate farmer participatory research, which is conducted on their own fields addressing their own problems. This has been strengthened through an innovation of RDRS. RDRS has been active in institutionalising a model approach of farmer participatory research that links with the graduate education of national and international universities in the field of agriculture and agricultural extension. They have formalised this approach through MoUs with many universities. The approach was developed under the PETRRA-supported project but has been mainstreamed within RDRS. Since 2003, about fifty students completed their MS and PhD under this initiative. Thirdly, seed has been one area where voice of the poor has played a very significant role. The farmer federations have organized their own seed production and marketing system in different parts of the region. The concerned federations have each formed their seed committee which runs the business based on the local variety demand. RDRS is playing an important role in providing business support to these federations. The Focal Area Forum has been instrumental in its support of such enterprises and has supported through market information and capacity building (RDRS 2005; Salahuddin and Magor 2009).

Conclusion

It is evident that technological intervention in the field of agriculture has the potential to reduce the vulnerability caused by *monga* for the agriculturally dependent labourers and marginal farmers in the northwest region of Bangladesh. Actors that are promoting this strategy seem convinced of its effectiveness.

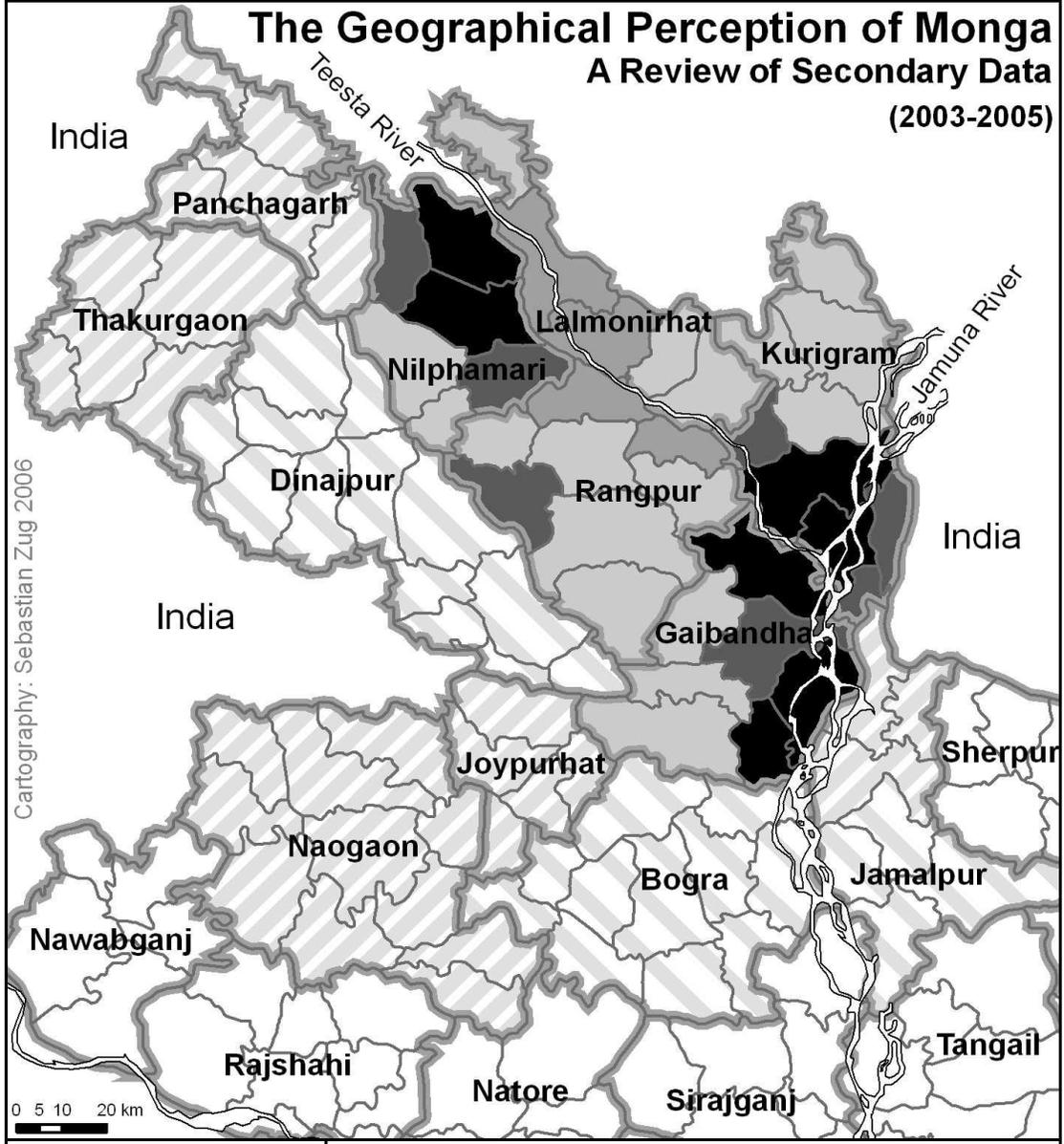
Most importantly, the early success of BRRIDhan33 technology as one of the potential responses has taken place within a context of a home-grown regional multi-stakeholder initiative. The actors achieved their confidence through a previous history of working together under the PETRRA project. It illustrates a decentralised joint public–civil society–private sector initiative that can be replicated in other regions of the country and also in similar situations in other countries. However, there is a need for a local champion like RDRS that can anchor the development activities and facilitate the process such that all others can play their due role. In the process there is a critical need to find an appropriate facilitator who can continuously ask the right questions at the right time.

There is the possibility to move beyond the experience of *monga* mitigation. At a regional level it is possible to organise collective activities that utilise available physical, financial and human resources for training, extension, information exchange and validation of innovations. The forum is not dependent on external resources. Instead the local activities would form part of the ongoing operations of local actors.

The MoU signed between RDRS and the DAE to fully utilise each other's comparative advantage was a simple way for GO-NGO cooperation, but in itself proved to be a very significant breakthrough in thinking. Endorsement by the state minister for agriculture provided that necessary political level support for the forum to move ahead. The RIB and later IRRI engagement with the forum and the subsequent success of the program provided extra evidence and confidence in the approach. The forum provided a platform that utilised local actors working together to combat the seasonality of *monga*.

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Index on the Prevalence of Monga*

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*The index bases on four reports of PPRC, DER, CPD and WFP, who targeted the monga regions. Articles of the Newspapers Daily Star (2003-05) and New Age (2004-05) were revised. All six sources were counted equally. More details in: S. Zug, "Monga – Seasonal Food Insecurity in Bangladesh", NETZ, 2006 (forthcoming).