

# Impact of Increasing Landlessness on Access to Food: Experience of Small and Marginal Farmers in Rural Bangladesh

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## Acknowledgement

The research paper on the Impact of landlessness on the access to food is a portrait of the vulnerability of the landless poor farmers in securing their access to adequate food. The manuscript is an output of a research programme of Economic Policy Unit, undertaken by the Unnayan Onneshan- The Innovators, a center for research and action on development. The report has been immensely benefited from the insight shared by the small and marginal landless farmers from the survey areas of Kurigram and Khulna. The research paper is prepared by Mehruna Islam Chowdhury with the guidance of Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir.



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## **Executive Summary**

Physical and economic access to food ensures an active and healthy life. For attaining food security, access to adequate and nutritious food is required. Access to productive resources, such as land is regarded crucial for attaining food security, through increasing access to sufficient food. In Bangladesh, food insecurity remains a reality for millions, including farmers and landless labourers. Due to increasing population, unjust market intervention, poor governance, medium and small farmers are losing their productive land and becoming landless gradually. Moreover, climate induced hazards, such as recurring floods, cyclones, river bank erosion are also contributing to the increasing landlessness. The current study has been taken to explore the link between landlessness and access to food in rural Bangladesh. The study reveals that even though 75 percent food production comes from the rural areas, however due to landlessness and some associated factors, the small and marginal farmers in the rural areas are still deprived from their access to food. Landlessness of the farmers leads to their insufficient purchasing power to buy adequate nutritious food for their families. The farmers are faced with food insecurity, which has impacts on the livelihood of the farmers in various dimensions. Finally the study reveals the view of the small and marginal landless farmers on substantive actions necessary to achieve their access to food.

## Introduction

*“If one person in eight starves regularly in the world, this is seen as the result of his inability to establish entitlement to enough food; the question of the physical availability of the food is not directly involved.”- Amartya Sen, 1981.*

The initial focus of the definition of food security was on the volume and stability of food supplies. But in 1983, FAO expanded the concept of food security to include securing the access of vulnerable people to available food supplies. According to the definition of food security in the 1996 World Food Summit, “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

According to the Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, access to food depends on the entitlement of certain factors including entitlement to productive assets, such as land. Lack of entitlement to land is one of the most frequently cited causes of poverty, with the chronically poor being exposed directly to the various interlocking factors that push them further into poverty. Acute food crisis associated with the constant poverty leads to the prevalence of starvation, which brings multidimensionality in the aspect of food insecurity of the landless people.

The small and marginal farmers are endangered by their lack of access to productive resources, such as land. Farmers in the rural areas of Bangladesh, who are the provider of food of the whole nation, are deprived from their essentials including food. Due to their lack of access to the necessary resources, their purchasing powers are reduced. They are dispossessed from their entitlement to productive resources including land by many factors comprised of poverty, indebtedness, climatic factors, etc. As they do not have access to necessary financial resources, the hardcore poor farmers often have to sell off their small holdings, either to pay off their debts or to persist on their regular expenses. Climate induced factors are among the most common causes of farmers in the rural areas being landless. Rivers in Bangladesh erode the homes and land of many people. For the purpose of this study, livelihood of the small farmers, who have become victims of man- made and natural hazards have been studied.

Food security has been a very important issue of research for the last few years, but the food security of the small and marginal farmers who are most vulnerable to internal and external shocks, have not received due attention from the researchers and policymakers. This study aims to explore the impact of landlessness on the livelihood of the poor farmers in the rural areas, particularly on their access to food. During the analysis, emphasis has been given on the food intake pattern of the landless farmers and their families to assess the extent of their food insecurity as a result of losing their entitlement to land.

## Study Method

The study is based on primary and secondary data. Food security situation and trend of landlessness in Bangladesh are supported by the secondary data. For collecting information on the livelihood of the landless farmers, the techniques of in- depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions have been adopted to assess the impact of landlessness on their access to food. Survey questionnaire have been used for the in- depth interviews of small and marginal farmers and their family members. The questionnaire included information on their socio-economic characteristics regarding their income level, number of family members, resources at their possession now and which they had to forego etc. Information on their food intake and consumption pattern and issues related to their vulnerability reducing their access to adequate food has also been integrated in the questionnaire.

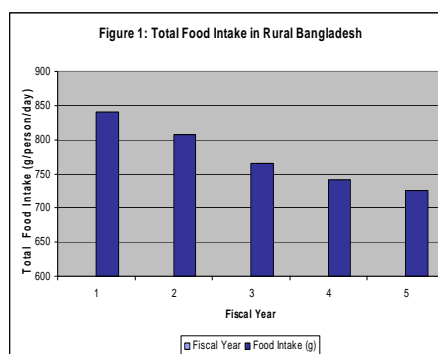
For the purpose of the study, observation has been done in some drought prone areas under the Kurigram district in the northern part of Bangladesh. Some areas of Khulna district, which are subject to frequent climate catastrophes, have also been chosen as study area.

## Situation of Food Security in Bangladesh

Food insecurity remains a reality for the millions of poor of Bangladesh, including small and marginal farmers in the rural areas. Whereas farmers purvey food for the enormous population of the country, they are mostly underprivileged by losing their rights including their right to food. Farmers' access to food is mainly obstructed due to lack of purchasing power and several other factors including climate variability, imperfect functionality of market and gender discrimination. Farmers' lack of purchasing power is associated with their missing access to the productive assets which leads to their suffering with chronic hunger.

Bangladesh is a net food importing country. The country has been faced with challenges of natural disasters and high food price in recent years. The two events have exacerbated the incidence of poverty in Bangladesh since 2007. According to a joint estimation of World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in 2009, 35 million people in Bangladesh are consuming less than 1,805 kcal per day and between 2007 and 2008, 7.5 million more people joined the category of people consuming less than 2,122 kcal per day.65 million people in the country are unable to bear the expense of their basic food basket.

Malnutrition in Bangladesh is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. There is a declining trend in the food intake in rural Bangladesh (Figure 1). According to the Report of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey, average food intake in the rural area was 946.3, 898.7, 910.5 and 878.1 grams in the year 2005, 2000, 1995-96 and 1991-92 respectively.



Source: Government of Food and Disaster Management, GoB & World Food Programme, 2005.

A number of factors prevent poor households in the rural areas to acquire enough food. The factors include insufficient income level for which the poor farmers are unable to purchase the necessary foods prevailing in the market. The rural households also lack the necessary assets or access to credit to assist them during the adversities. One of the main reasons of food insecurity among the rural poor is lack of their access to productive resources. Land- oriented poverty is a crucial factor in augmenting food insecurity in the rural households. The people who do not have access to food are vulnerable due to the function of various economic, ecological, geographical and demographic factors. Among the economic factors, level of income, occupation, ownership of land etc are predominant.

### Landlessness in Bangladesh

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), following categories of people are to be considered as landless:

- Agricultural labour households with little or no land
- Non-agricultural households who are engaged in non-farm activities including fishing, craft making etc and own little or no land.
- Other rural households including peasants practicing shifting cultivation, hunters, pastoralists and people with similar livelihood.

Among the aforementioned categories, the first two categories are partially or fully landless and depend on wage labour for their subsistence.

Landless people are confronted with multidimensional aspects of poverty. The poor who are landless are exposed to various interlocking factors which are the causes and consequences of poverty and landlessness.

Landlessness is one of the factors that materialize the manifestation of poverty and food insecurity in Bangladesh. More than 80 percent of the total population of Bangladesh live in rural areas with very small proportion having enough land to survive and are in absolute poverty [I-PRSP, 2003]. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of landless people living in the urban and rural areas of Bangladesh. Landlessness in Bangladesh has increased at almost the same rate as population in the past. During 1960 to 1984, the number of rural landless households increased at 2.5 percent per year with the increase in the number of rural households at 2.2 percent. [Nayenga, 2003]

Table1: Distribution Landless Households by Urban, Rural and Division

Division	Number of landless households ('000)		Percent of landless households	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Barisal	25	137	1.44	7.92
Chittagong	174	475	3.44	9.84
Dhaka	789	1,129	8.36	11.96
Khulna	104	298	3.03	8.71
Rajshahi	104	1,006	1.35	13.15
Sylhet	24	211	1.56	13.76
Bangladesh	1,221	3,256	4.25	11.35

Source: Preliminary Report of Agricultural Census, 2008, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

In the Preliminary report on Agricultural Census, 2008, landless households have been considered as those who do not own any type of land. According to the report, 28.67 million households in the country, 4.48 million households are absolutely landless. It has been recorded that there are 3.26 million landless households in the total number of 25.35 millions households in the rural areas.

### Impact of Landlessness

Landlessness is caused by the complex interaction of various topographical, socio-economic and political forces. Increase in the number of landlessness leads to increase in the number of people who are unable to meet their livelihood requirements, for which eventually concomitant social problems arise. Landlessness has serious impact on the different aspects of human security. The most serious problem that arises is the incapability of the poor people to have access to sufficient food.

From the in-depth interviews it has been observed that landlessness has led to the depletion of the entitlement to productive asset. Major causes behind the landlessness of farmers are poverty associated with indebtedness, lack of access to financial resources, climate factors, corruption etc.

From the findings it has been seen that most of the landless farmers, who had previously cultivated their own land, have now become agricultural wage labourers. Landlessness of farmers has led to the negative impact on the different aspects of human security from various dimensions. Impact of landlessness on different aspects of human security is shown in table 2.

**Table 2: Impact of Landlessness on Human Security**

Human Security	Security Aspect	Impacts
Security of Livelihood	Food Security	<input type="checkbox"/> Reduction in the volume of agricultural production. <input type="checkbox"/> Depleted supply of healthy and nutritious food <input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate intake <input type="checkbox"/> Uncertainty in food acquisition for households
	Water Security	<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of safe drinking water <input type="checkbox"/> Flooding
	Economic Security	<input type="checkbox"/> Decreased income generating activities <input type="checkbox"/> Women working in informal sector mostly affected
	Shelter Security	<input type="checkbox"/> Housing infrastructure destroyed due to climatic factors



		or forcedly occupied <input type="checkbox"/> Limited land rights
Security of Survival	Health	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased infectious diseases <input type="checkbox"/> Physical and mental stress
Dignity	Basic Human Rights	<input type="checkbox"/> Violation of basic human rights <input type="checkbox"/> Violence against women increases <input type="checkbox"/> Increase of stress factors

Source: Adapted from-Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, GoB and World Food Programme. 19-20 October, 2005

Insufficient income leads to their inability to buy adequate food for the family. The poor farmers are not able to secure their access to food even when food is available in the locality or the regional market. In addition to being deprived from their right to land, the landless farmers are affected by shocks and events beyond their control, such as climatic conditions (droughts, floods and cyclones), Price shocks etc.

### **Multidimensional Impacts**

From the field level observation, it has been seen that landlessness of farmers leads to their lack of access to food leading to insufficient intake and deterioration in their food quality. The following information has been achieved from the case studies:

- **Food Quantity:**

It has been observed that the quantity of food consumed at individual and household level is inadequate. At the individual level, lack of access to food results in physical sensation of hunger. Whereas, at the household level there arises the problem of food acquisition and management. In households with large number of family members the problem is more severe.

There prevails gender discrimination in intra-household food intake. The female members of the family take their meal with the leftovers of the male members of the family. When the quantity of food is insufficient, the female adults of the family are the ones to compromise. The problem is reflected in the statement of one of the female respondents, one of which is presented in the following case study.

### **Inequality in intra-household Food Intake**

*“I have to skip my meal someday, so that my children do not have to starve, when I cannot get enough to eat or nothing at all, I cannot sleep at night with stomach pain.”*

- Sitting on the doorstep of her hut, hunger stricken Baserun uttered those words. At the age of fifty she is a domestic worker who depends entirely on her income to feed her family with five members. Sometimes she has to starve a whole days as it becomes difficult for her to feed the whole family with her limited income.

Baserun had 3 katha of land which she acquired from her father. But her land has been grabbed by the local musclemen in the year 2006 after the death of her husband, who was a farmer and was the only earning member of the family. Since then, Baserun is in severe hardship and is totally dependent on her employer’s compassion. At this age it is very difficult to do the household works, but with no other option she is continuing with it. Baserun remembers the days when she could feed her family with proper meals and see the happy faces of her children.

Baserun was able to provide a healthy diet to her children. Fish, meat, milk, egg- these were the items that were included in the food basket she could provide to her family every so often. But now once in a month she can buy only small fish, which is also very inadequate for the whole family, Baserun couldnt have any other kind of fish for a whole month . For two weeks in the last month she had to eat rice with salt and chili. Baserun remembers one day when she had no food at home, she had to borrow a kg of rice from her neighbour.

Everyday of her life is faced with uncertainty and Baserun is unsure how long she will be able to continue her work, now she is looking onto her twelve year old son whom she wishes to send to the town to get a job.

Source: Case studies from Kurigram and Khulna

#### ● Food Quality:

The consumption patterns of the farmers and their families are nutritionally inadequate. Their food basket includes very limited variety of foods due to financial resource constraints. At the household level, the adults compromise their intake for the children.

### **Nutritionally Insufficient Intake**

Mohammad Banijuddin is a small farmer of Roumari in the district of Kurigram. He had owned a little piece of land adjacent to his homestead which he had acquired from his father, in which he used to produce vegetable which he could sell and earn little. But Banijuddin had to sell his piece of land to a mahajan, whom he had taken loan from and for being unable to repay the loan for a long time, he had to give up his piece of land. He now owns only the small piece of land where he has built his dwelling house. He works as a tenant farmer now, with very insignificant income to bear the expense of adequate food for his seven member family.

*“ I feel guilty for not being able to provide enough food for my children. My children often become sick and I think it is because they are not getting adequate and sufficient food. I am afraid that I may have to let go of my ancestral dwelling some day”*

Rice with salt and chilli is the regular menu of his breakfast. Instead of small fish, he couldn’t buy any other kind of fish for his children for about six months. And he hardly remembers when he had bought meat for his family

Source: Case studies from Kurigram and Khulna.

## ● Social Dimension

At the individual level, lack of access to food results in disruption in the usual pattern of eating. At the household level, problem arises in acquisition and management of food for the family. Sometimes acquisition of food involves strategies which include seeking food from food assistance programme, selling possessions, buying food on credit etc. The poor in the rural areas mostly depend on natural resources for food acquisition. Figure 2 shows a landless farmer and his family collecting small fish, which they had bought from a fisherman at a very low price. The amount of fish is very insignificant, which is moreover mixed up with weeds and dirty leaves.



Figure 2: A family (victim of cyclone) collecting small fish

### Acquisition of loan for Food

Mohammad Goni Morol is a tenant farmer in Koyra in the district of Khulna. With four family members it is difficult for Goni Morol to acquire food for his family. He has lost the 3 katha land that he got from his father in land erosion and now depends on his daily wage which is very low.

*“ I had a very hard time when price of essentials went up high, someday my children had to eat rice with salt and chilli”.*

- said Goni Morol, who depends on the mercy of the landowner. He is the only earning member of the family. He hardly remembers when he could buy fish and meat for his children during the last few months. He had to take loan a few times for buying food during the flood this year. And the repayment has been a big burden on him. He is disheartened for not being able to feed his children properly and is faced with uncertainty about the adequacy of sustainable food supply for his children in future.

Source: Case studies from Kurigram and Khulna

## ● Psychological Dimension

*“When I get up in the morning, I begin to worry if I would be able to get enough food for my family today, at night I start thinking about tomorrow.”*

-these were the words uttered by one of the farmers interviewed. Feeling of deprivation is the result of not having access to food and food insecurity at the individual level. Whereas, at the household level, it results in uncertainty in the acquisition of food and problems associated in managing adequate and nutritious food for the family.

As observed in the case studies, as the poor farmers become dispossessed from their entitlement to land, they lose their access to required food. The landless farmers and their families suffer from acute food crisis, the impacts of which vary at individual and household level leading to food insecurity in various dimensions (Table 3)

**Table 3: Dimensions of food insecurity of farmers**

	Individual level	Household level
Quantitative	Inadequate intake	Depleted food supply
Qualitative	Nutritional insufficiency	Unsuitable food
Psychological	Lack of choice, feeling of deprivation	Insecurity about the adequacy and sustainability of food supply
Social	Disruptions in the usual eating pattern and departure from societal norms	Problems associated with food supply management and acquisition

Source: Adapted from- Tarasuk, V. 2001

Deprivation from the basic need of food of the small farmers in the rural areas as observed in the in-depth interviews identifies some core concepts of food insecurity that is experienced by the poor farmers, which are ;

- Food security is experienced as absolute food deprivation as a result of lack of access to food arising from low purchasing power and losing entitlement to assets.
- The experience of food security is dynamic in nature. It is characterized by the temporal sequence of events and the nature of it depends on the frequency, duration and periodicity of the events.
- Household level and individual level food security is different in nature depending on the extent of their access to food. Food insecurity at individual level includes mostly of physiological sensation of hunger, whereas at the household level it is mostly associated with the problems of food supply management and food acquisition.
- There is intra-household food insecurity, where the adults, mostly female adults compromise their own intake and experience the severity of the insecurity.

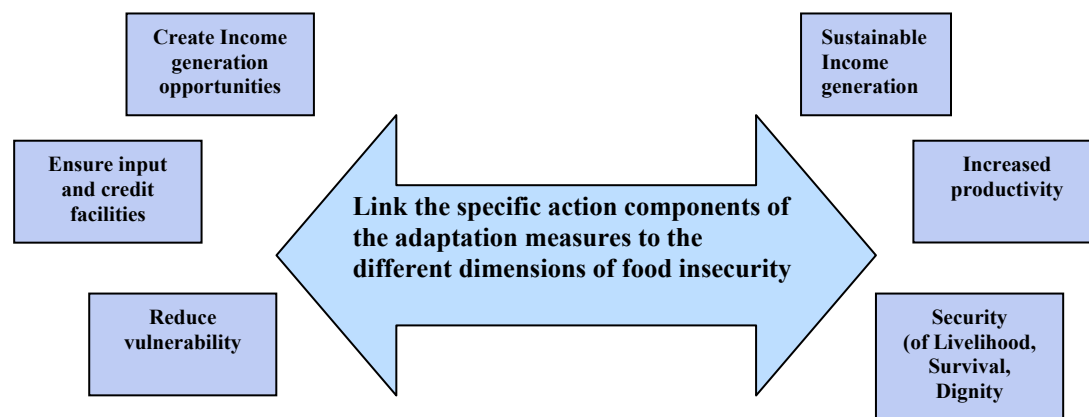
### **Recommended Strategies**

According to the small and marginal landless farmers, the government and the NGOs can provide them necessary support by undertaking adequate measures to ensure their food safety. For the purpose of this study, some Focus Group Discussions (FGD) have been carried out and the poor landless farmers have given their opinion regarding necessary measures to be adopted to dissuade the increasing landlessness and ensure their access to basic food requirement.

From the farmers' point of view, necessary measures for land erosion like building embankments and dredging at adequate intervals may be undertaken as long term measures for averting land erosion. Adoption of measures for avoiding forced occupation of land by the influential is indispensable. For this purpose, law and order in the remote rural areas should be strengthened. Government can also adopt the measures for increasing employment opportunities for the poor farmers, who are landless and seek out for income generation activities. Sustainable income generation is crucial for ensuring access of the landless poor to their basic requirements including access to adequate food. Provision of credit facilities for the small and marginal farmers is also essential. According to the farmers' point of view, the NGOs can

provide cash and food support to the landless farmers, especially during the crisis periods like drought and cyclone.

It would be necessary first to identify and prioritize the problems faced by the landless farmers based on their severity. As observed in the case studies, most of the landless poor are deprived from adequate nutritious food and the situation is deplorable. In this regard it would be necessary to identify some measures to solve the problems and link them to their basic problems. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3: Linkage of problems with specific strategies for expected outcome**

Some short run and long run measures can be adopted to ensure the access of the landless to basic food requirement, as shown in table 4.

**Table 4: Recommended Strategies**

Strategies	Activities
<p><b><u>Short Term</u></b></p> <p>Stability in Food Consumption</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Build up security stock of food of the government for emergencies.</li> <li>□ Strengthen the food transfer programmes (VGD and others) and sufficient monitoring.</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Long Term</u></b></p> <p>Ensure access to food by all</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Increase agricultural productivity.</li> <li>□ Provision of low-cost food supply</li> <li>□ Assure input availability at low cost</li> <li>□ Create sustainable employment opportunities</li> <li>□ Expansion of credit facilities.</li> </ul>

## **Conclusion**

Landlessness in Bangladesh is both a historical and structural phenomena. Clear understanding of the problems faced by the landless households is essential to establish link between the problems and the required adaptation measures.

The socio-economic status of the landless farmers in the rural areas is appalling, as observed during the field level observation, characterized by lack of access to basic requirements, including adequate food. It has been seen that there is lack of physical and social purchasing power of the small farmers in the rural areas. The landless farmers and their families have very low level of income, which is susceptible to natural catastrophes and man-made hazards. Measures of shock management are not sufficient to act as safeguard measures for farmers against disasters.

The country has managed to achieve considerable success in augmenting domestic production, but effective management and maintenance of the prevailing food stocks is essential. Moreover, as the small and marginal landless farmers are most susceptible to internal and external shocks, their inclusion in the policies and researches is crucial. Undertaking short run measures would increase the accessibility of the poor to the necessary food, but it is necessary to adopt long run measures to ensure their accessibility to adequate food and a healthy life.

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