

Livelihood Strategies of the Chronically Poor in Rural Bangladesh

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Introduction

Livelihood strategy is referred here the occupation that a person usually works to earn income for his/her livelihood. Occupation is often the most important livelihood strategy and the main source of income of the households in rural areas. If a person works in more than one occupations, that occupation which provide larger share of income is regarded as primary occupation. Primary occupations of household heads are diversified and varied by economic group and gender. But in the absence of diversified rural industry and adequate non-farm activities, bulk of people have to depend on agricultural sector which is already overcrowded and beset with problems of unemployment, underemployment and low earnings.

In spite of having several problems, livelihoods in rural Bangladesh are primarily based on agricultural activities and thus are related to agricultural seasons. The production of food crops, cash cropping, agricultural labour and animal husbandry are the main income generating activities though variations exists between economic groups. Agriculture, particularly farming, is the main source of income of majority of the rural non-poor, while the chronically poor largely depend on selling labour in agricultural activities for their livelihoods. But the demand for agricultural labour

does not remain constant and varies with the variation of crop season. Thus demand for labour sometimes turns abruptly downward which results in decrease of wage rate and increase of vulnerability to food insecurity. Daily wage labour, petty trade/self employment are also important livelihood strategies for the chronically poor.

This paper is based on a survey conducted in the period from November 2004 to January 2005 in 32 villages of 8 districts in rural Bangladesh. A total of 1,282 households that involve 6,397 people are surveyed. The households are classified in four economic groups: the chronically poor, descending non-poor, ascending poor, and the non-poor.

This research intends to contribute to a deeper understanding in order to analyse more incisively the situation of the chronic poverty, and therefore to more appropriate policy recommendation to “development” from the point of view of “human poverty” rather than just “income poverty.”

1. Livelihood of Male Household Heads

Livelihoods of about 50 percent of non-poor, 43 percent of descending non-poor, 43 percent of ascending poor male household heads were depended upon the agriculture, while the agricultural labour activity was the main source of livelihood of the majority (39%) of the chronically poor household heads and they are less involved in farming. Rickshaw/van pulling was also another source of income of the chronically poor. Thus the livelihoods of male heads of chronically poor households depend on low-paying, physically demanding and socially unattractive occupations. Petty business was also the main occupation of 5 percent of non-poor, 14 percent of descending non-poor, 12 percent of ascending poor and 10 percent of chronically poor households. Service and business were important sources of livelihood of

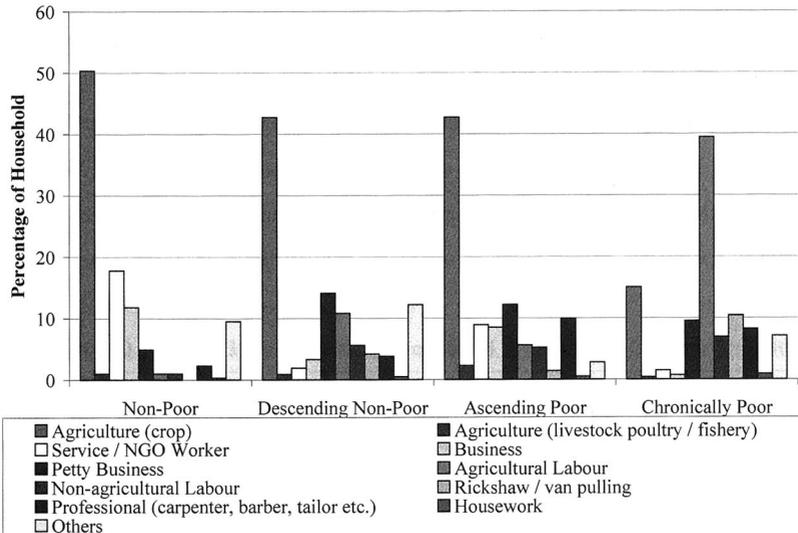
non-poor and ascending poor households, while very low proportion of heads of descending non-poor and chronically poor households were engaged in these two socially attractive and profitable activities. Only 2 percent and 3 percent of the descending non-poor and 1.5 percent and 0.7 percent of the chronically poor household heads were engaged in service and business respectively (Table 1). Figure 1 illustrates the primary occupation of male household heads by economic group.

Table 1: Primary Occupation of Male Household Head by Economic Group

Occupation of Male Household Head	Economic Group				Total
	Non-poor	Descending non-poor	Ascending poor	Chronically poor	
Agriculture (crop)	153 (50.3)	91 (42.7)	91 (42.7)	68 (15.0)	403 (34.1)
Agriculture (livestock poultry/fishery)	3 (1.0)	2 (0.9)	5 (2.3)	2 (0.4)	12 (1.0)
Service/NGO Worker	54 (17.8)	4 (1.9)	19 (8.9)	7 (1.5)	84 (7.1)
Business	36 (11.8)	7 (3.3)	18 (8.5)	3 (0.7)	64 (5.4)
Petty Business	15 (4.9)	30 (14.1)	28 (12.2)	43 (9.5)	114 (9.6)
Agricultural Labour	3 (1.0)	23 (10.8)	12 (5.6)	178 (39.4)	216 (18.3)
Non-agricultural Labour	3 (1.0)	12 (5.6)	11 (5.2)	31 (6.9)	57 (4.8)
Rickshaw/van pulling	—	9 (4.2)	3 (1.4)	47 (10.4)	59 (5.0)
Professional (carpenter, barber, tailor etc.)	7 (2.3)	8 (3.8)	21 (9.9)	37 (8.2)	73 (6.2)
Housework	1 (0.3)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.5)	4 (0.9)	7 (0.6)
Others	29 (9.5)	26 (12.2)	6 (2.8)	32 (7.1)	93 (7.9)
Total	304 (100.0)	213 (100.0)	213 (100.0)	452 (100.0)	1182 (100.0)

Note: Figure in parenthesis is the percentage of column total.

Figure 1: Primary Occupation of Male Household Heads



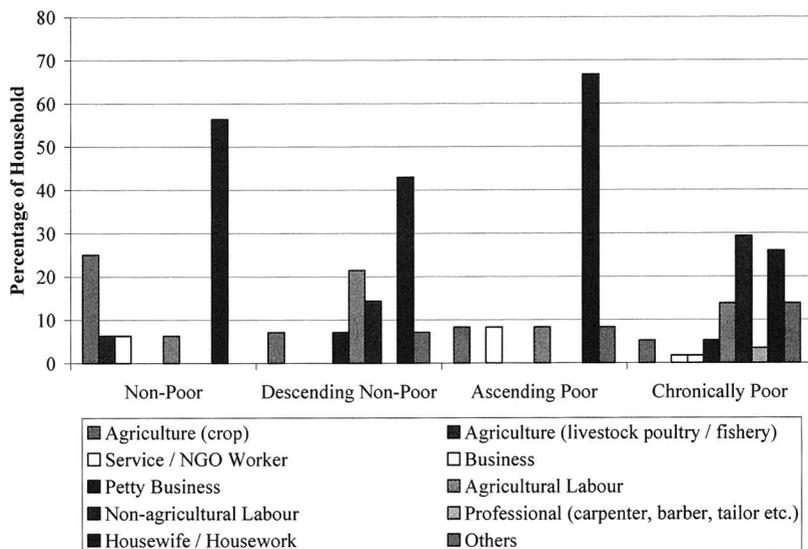
2. Livelihood of Female Household Heads

Most of the female heads of *non-poor* (56%), *descending non-poor* (43%) and *ascending poor* households (67%) spend time on household work but majority of the female heads of *chronically poor* households work outside the home (74%). The most common primary occupation of female heads of *chronically poor* households were non-agricultural labour (29%), agricultural labour (14%) followed by agriculture (5%) and petty business (5%). These occupations except agricultural crop production do not need material resources but are highly physically burdensome and low-paying activities. Moreover, these livelihoods are constrained by natural calamities, and consequently they influence availability of jobs and employment opportunities (Table 2). Women also get a lower wage rate than their male counterparts for the same amount of work and thus women are more concerned about employment which might affect their income (CARE, 2003).

Table 2: Primary Occupation of Female Household Head by Economic Group

Occupation of Female Household Head	Economic Group				Total
	Non-poor	Descending non-poor	Ascending poor	Chronically poor	
Agriculture (crop)	4 (25.0)	1 (7.1)	1 (8.3)	3 (5.2)	9 (1.0)
Agriculture (livestock poultry/fishery)	1 (6.3)	—	—	—	1 (1.0)
Service/NGO Worker	1 (6.3)	—	1 (8.3)	1 (1.7)	3 (3.0)
Business	—	—	—	1 (1.7)	1 (1.0)
Petty Business	—	1 (7.1)	—	3 (5.2)	4 (4.0)
Agricultural Labour	1 (6.3)	3 (21.4)	1 (8.3)	8 (13.8)	13 (13.0)
Non-agricultural Labour	—	2 (14.3)	—	17 (29.3)	19 (19.0)
Professional (carpenter, barber, tailor etc.)	—	—	—	2 (3.4)	2 (2.0)
Housewife/Housework	9 (56.3)	6 (42.9)	8 (66.7)	15 (25.9)	38 (38.0)
Others	—	1 (7.1)	1 (8.3)	8 (13.8)	10 (10.0)
Total	16 (100.0)	14 (100.0)	12 (100.0)	58 (100.0)	100 (100.0)

Figure 2: Primary Occupation of Female Household Heads.



3. Secondary Livelihood Activities of Household Heads

Tables 3 and 4 give the secondary income sources for male heads and female heads respectively. Secondary income sources of male household heads were again farming (34%) followed by agricultural labour (30%), petty business (10%), non-agricultural labour (6%) and other activities (Table 3). Very few female household heads had secondary sources of income except household work. Out of 100 female household heads, 27 female-heads reported to be engaged in secondary occupations to enhance their incomes among which 10 heads were engaged in household work, 5 in agriculture, 3 in non-agricultural labour, 2 in agricultural labour and 2 in livestock rearing and petty business and 5 in other activities. Thus gender-based discrimination occurs in livelihood strategies (Table 4).

Table 3: Secondary Occupation of Male Household Head by Economic Group

Occupation of Household Head	Economic Group				Total
	Non-poor	Descending non-poor	Ascending poor	Chronically poor	
Agriculture (crop)	39 (44.8)	27 (40.9)	28 (31.8)	39 (25.3)	133 (33.7)
Agriculture (livestock poultry/fishery)	4 (4.6)	—	—	—	4 (1.0)
Service/NGO Worker	2 (2.3)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.1)	—	4 (1.0)
Business	6 (6.9)	—	2 (2.3)	1 (0.6)	9 (2.3)
Petty Business	15 (17.2)	2 (3.0)	13 (14.8)	9 (5.8)	39 (9.9)
Agricultural Labour	6 (6.9)	22 (33.3)	27 (30.7)	65 (42.2)	120 (30.4)
Non-agricultural Labour	2 (2.3)	6 (9.1)	3 (3.4)	14 (9.1)	25 (6.3)
Rickshaw/van pulling	—	—	2 (2.3)	4 (2.6)	6 (1.5)
Professional (carpenter, barber, tailor etc.)	2 (2.3)	2 (3.0)	5 (5.7)	10 (6.5)	19 (4.8)
Housework	1 (1.1)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.1)	—	3 (0.8)
Others	10 (11.5)	5 (7.8)	6 (6.8)	12 (7.8)	33 (8.4)
Total	87 (100.0)	66 (100.0)	88 (100.0)	154 (100.0)	395 (100.0)

Table 4: Secondary Occupation of Female Household Head by Economic Group

Occupation of Household Head	Economic Group				Total
	Non-Poor	Descending Non-Poor	Ascending Poor	Chronically Poor	
Agriculture (crop)	2 (40.0)	—	2 (66.7)	1 (6.7)	5 (18.5)
Agriculture (livestock poultry/fishery)	—	1 (25.0)	—	—	1 (3.7)
Petty Business	—	—	1 (33.3)	—	1 (3.7)
Agricultural Labour	—	2 (50.0)	—	—	2 (7.4)
Non-agricultural Labour	—	—	—	3 (20.0)	3 (11.1)
Housewife/Housework	3 (50.0)	—	—	7 (46.7)	10 (37.0)
Others	—	1 (25.0)	—	4 (26.7)	5 (18.5)
Total	5 (100.0)	4 (100.0)	3 (100.0)	15 (100.0)	27 (100.0)

4. Livelihood Strategies of Household Members

A relatively high proportion of male-headed household members of age 14 years and above are engaged in agricultural activities, while the majority of the chronically poor household members are more likely to be engaged in agricultural labour activity. The highest percentage of women members are involved in domestic work and majority of the children are occupied with their studies as student (Table 5). Conversely, a high proportion of members from female-headed households were involved in agricultural and non-agricultural labour activities. But very few members from female-headed non-poor and ascending poor households were seen to be involved in labour activities for income generation (Table 6). However, agriculture is an important part of the livelihood of rural non-poor and ascending poor, while selling of labour is an important strategy of livelihood of the descending non-poor and the chronically poor. This indicates that being vulnerable the chronically poor and descending non-poor household members are more likely to

participate in labour activities, either by choice or by circumstance.

Table 5: Distribution of Male-headed Household Members (14 years of age and above) by Occupation and Economic Group.

Occupation of Household Members	Economic Group				Total
	Non-poor	Descending non-poor	Ascending poor	Chronically poor	
Agriculture (Crop)	258 (20.9)	125 (17.8)	127 (17.4)	85 (6.7)	595 (15.2)
Agriculture (Fishing)	9 (0.7)	2 (0.3)	6 (0.8)	4 (0.3)	21 (0.6)
Service	104 (8.4)	23 (3.3)	56 (7.7)	23 (1.8)	206 (5.2)
Business	56 (4.5)	13 (1.9)	20 (2.7)	5 (0.4)	95 (2.4)
Petty Business	25 (2.0)	43 (6.1)	40 (5.5)	56 (4.4)	164 (4.2)
Agricultural Labour	6 (0.5)	41 (5.8)	21 (2.9)	238 (18.7)	304 (7.7)
Non-Agricultural Labour	14 (1.1)	29 (4.1)	32 (4.4)	104 (8.2)	179 (4.6)
Rickshaw/Van Pulling	—	11 (1.6)	6 (0.8)	56 (4.4)	73 (1.9)
Professional (Carpenter, Barber, Tailor etc.)	22 (1.8)	18 (2.6)	36 (4.9)	62 (4.9)	138 (3.6)
Housework	423 (34.3)	262 (37.4)	258 (35.4)	469 (37.1)	1412 (36.0)
Student	213 (17.3)	81 (11.6)	68 (9.3)	52 (4.1)	414 (10.5)
Others	104 (8.4)	53 (7.6)	59 (8.1)	111 (8.8)	327 (8.3)
Total	1234 (100.0)	701 (100.0)	729 (100.0)	1263 (100.0)	3927 (100.0)

Table 6: Distribution of Female-headed Household Members (14 years and above) by Occupation and Economic Group.

Occupation of Household Head	Economic Group				Total
	Non-Poor	Descending Non-Poor	Ascending Poor	Chronically Poor	
Agriculture (Crop, Fishing, Poultry, Livestock rearing)	10 (22.2)	2 (4.8)	2 (6.9)	4 (3.2)	18 (7.4)
Service	4 (8.9)	4 (9.5)	4 (13.8)	6 (4.8)	18 (7.4)
Petty Business	2 (4.4)	1 (2.4)	1 (3.4)	5 (4.0)	9 (3.7)
Agricultural Labour	1 (2.2)	5 (11.9)	—	15 (11.9)	21 (8.7)
Non-Agricultural Labour	—	3 (7.1)	3 (10.3)	27 (21.4)	33 (13.6)
Rickshaw/Van Pulling	—	—	—	5 (4.0)	5 (2.1)
Professional (Carpenter, Barber, Tailor etc.)	2 (4.4)	2 (4.8)	—	4 (3.2)	8 (3.3)
Housewife	21 (46.7)	16 (38.1)	13 (44.8)	35 (27.8)	85 (35.1)
Student	3 (6.7)	2 (4.8)	5 (17.2)	12 (9.5)	22 (9.1)
Others	2 (4.4)	7 (16.7)	1 (3.4)	13 (10.3)	23 (9.5)
Total	45 (100.0)	42 (100.0)	29 (100.0)	126 (100.0)	242 (100.0)

5. Scenario of Child Labour

Due to high incidence of poverty, child labour is a common phenomenon in rural Bangladesh. Children between 5-14 years old who were working at least 14 hours in a week on their jobs for pay or profit, or without pay or profit in a family farm or enterprise is termed as child labour for the present context. The survey results show that there were 1690 or 26.4 percent children aged 5-14 years and the average number of children per household was found to be 1.3. Out of 1690 children, 197 or 12.1 percent were engaged in different economic activities, 1240 or 76 percent were attending school. The proportion of children who were neither at work nor at school was estimated at 255 or 15.6 percent of the child population. The number of

male children at work was 3.4 times higher than female children and thus the participation rate is noticeably higher among boys (18%) than girls (5%). Among female working children, disproportionately higher number of female children from chronically poor (8%) were at work, while this ratio was 2 percent for non-poor, 5 percent for descending non-poor and 4 percent for ascending poor. The distribution of children aged 5-14 years by activity status, sex and economic group is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Distribution of Children Aged 5-14 Years by Status, Sex and Economic Group.

Economic Group	No. of Children at Work		No. of Children attending School		No. of Children neither at School nor at Work		Total	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Non-Poor	23 (12.0)	5 (2.3)	155 (80.2)	174 (81.3)	15 (7.8)	35 (16.4)	193 (100.0)	214 (100.0)
Descending Non-Poor	32 (17.1)	7 (4.6)	139 (74.3)	123 (81.5)	16 (8.6)	21 (13.9)	187 (100.0)	151 (100.0)
Ascending Poor	20 (12.2)	5 (3.8)	129 (79.2)	99 (76.8)	14 (8.6)	25 (19.4)	163 (100.0)	129 (100.0)
Chronically Poor	78 (23.4)	27 (8.4)	219 (65.8)	202 (63.2)	36 (10.8)	91 (28.4)	333 (100.0)	320 (100.0)
Total	153 (17.5)	44 (5.4)	642 (73.3)	598 (73.5)	81 (9.2)	172 (21.1)	876 (100.0)	814 (100.0)

The number of male children at work was significantly higher than their female counterparts, while the proportion of female children who were neither at school nor at work was much higher than their male counterparts. On the other hand, the proportion of child workers in chronically poor households was much higher than those in other economic groups.

6. Livelihood Strategies of Child Labour

The lowest proportion of children of the non-poor (7%) and ascending poor (9%) households was found to be engaged as child labour. But 12 percent of the

descending non-poor and 16 percent of the chronically poor children were engaged in child labour. Majority of the child workers from non-poor households were engaged agricultural and other multifarious activities, while the majority of the child workers from chronically poor households were engaged in agricultural labour and other activities to earn income for their livelihood and to supplement household income. Female child workers were usually engaged in non-farm activities (Table 8).

Table 8: Distribution of Children Aged 5-14 Years by Sex, Activity and Economic Group.

Economic Activity	Non-Poor		Descending Non-Poor		Ascending Poor		Chronically Poor	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Agriculture (Crop)	8 (34.8)	—	3 (9.4)	1 (14.3)	3(15.0)	—	3 (3.8)	—
Livestock and Poultry rearing	—	—	1 (3.1)	1 (4.3)	1(5.0)	—	1 (1.3)	1 (7.3)
Service	1 (4.3)	1 (20.0)	2 (6.2)	—	—	—	1 (1.3)	3 (11.1)
Petty Business	—	—	3 (9.4)	—	1(5.0)	—	—	—
Agricultural Labour	1 (4.3)	—	3 (6.4)	—	1(5.0)	—	8 (10.3)	1 (3.7)
Non-Agril. Labour	1 (4.3)	—	6 (18.8)	3 (42.8)	3(15.0)	—	14 (18.0)	4 (14.8)
Rickshaw/ Van Pulling	—	—	—	—	2(10.0)	—	3 (3.8)	—
Professional (carpenter, tailor etc.)	1 (4.3)	—	2 (6.2)	—	2 (10.0)	1 (20.0)	4 (5.1)	1 (3.7)
Others	11 (48.0)	4 (80.0)	12 (37.5)	2 (28.6)	7 (35.0)	3 (60.0)	44 (56.4)	17 (63.0)
Total	23 (100.0)	5 (100.0)	32 (100.0)	7 (100.0)	20 (100.0)	5 (100.0)	78 (100.0)	27 (100.0)

Conclusions:

To sum up, livelihoods in rural Bangladesh are primarily based on agricultural activities. The primary sources of income of non-poor, descending non-poor and ascending poor households are mainly farming, while for chronically poor households depend on agricultural wage labour, non-agricultural labour, rickshaw/-van pulling and other occupations such as carpenter, barber etc. Female-headed non-poor household also depend on agriculture, while female-headed chronically poor households depend on agricultural labour and non-agricultural labour. Secondary sources of income of non-poor, descending non-poor and ascending poor households are also often the agriculture related work, while selling of labour, petty business and other work are the secondary income sources of chronically poor. Very few female-headed households have secondary resources of income other than household work.

With respect to the working children, it was found that there are some striking differences among the economic groups, sex, and types of job. The number of male children at work was more than 3 times higher than female children and thus the participation rate is noticeably higher among boys (18%) than girls (5%). Among female working children, disproportionately higher number of female children from chronically poor (8%) were at work, while this ratio was 2 percent for non-poor, 5 percent for descending non-poor and 4 percent for ascending poor.

However, because of poverty, men and women are increasingly taking up multiple activities as their livelihood strategies. It is hoped that degrees, times and types of deprivation the chronically poor suffer have been revealed in a clear and concise image with the survey. Though the general picture of the situation of the chronically poor thus emerged may not be much different from the generally-held common sense, it is believed that the numerical characterization of the chronic poverty as

compared with other economic group has a significant meaning for better policy recommendations.

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