Foreword

Of all the dimensions of rural deprivation the most neglected is seasonality. Vulnerability, sickness, powerlessness, exploitation, material poverty, under- and malnutrition, wages, prices, incomes ... these are recognised, researched and written about. But among them again and again seasonality is overlooked and left out.

Yet seasonality manifests in all these other dimensions and in how they interlock. This is almost universal for poor people, but especially so in the rural tropics. There, during the rains, poor people are repeatedly oppressed and screwed down by a cruel combination of lack of food, lack of money, high food prices, physical hardship, hard work vital for survival, debilitating sicknesses such as diarrhoeas and malaria, and isolation and lack of access to services. It is then that they are materially most poor, most vulnerable, most powerless, most exploited, most isolated, and most short of food. It is then that these dimensions most tightly interlock and reinforce each other. It is then that poor people suffer most and are most vulnerable to becoming poorer.

It is also when they are most invisible. Integrated seasonal poverty is matched and mirrored by integrated professional ignorance. Professionals anyway focus on their own specialised disciplinary concerns and miss linkages with those of others. This is compounded when all professions overlook seasonality. It does not see the stark and cyclical reality of the seasons when deprivations collide and hit poor people simultaneously. So research, reports and recommendations repeatedly omit the seasonal dimension. Papers published on rural poverty in the tropics often never mention it. I have never once read or heard it in the speech of a policy-maker. It is simply missing from most professionals' and policy-makers' mental maps.

The reasons are not far to seek. We development professionals are season-proofed - insulated and protected by our housing, air conditioning, fans and heaters, clothing, urban facilities, incomes, food supplies, protection from infection, and access to health services. Often we gain impressions most from rural elites, but as this book points out, while seasonality is bad for the poor it can be good for the rich. We are also season-blind - we travel least at the bad times during the rains and before the harvest, and when we do, stick more than ever to tarmac and places close to town. Except in full-blown famines, we rarely encounter or perceive the regular seasonal hardship, hunger and starvation of remoter poor people. Cyclical seasonal hunger is quiet and hidden. When the rains are over, the harvest is in, and people are through the worst, urban-based professionals travel again and venture further afield. Their impressions are then formed at the best times, missing the worst.

This book is a powerful corrective. It brings a new perspective and proposals for action that are new in their scope and focus. It shows how central seasonality is to the creation and deepening of deprivation. The case is made, irrefutably, that seasonal hunger is the father of famine and that famine cannot be stopped unless seasonal hunger is stopped.

What is so shocking is the evidence of how policies have made it worse. In earlier decades, in many countries, with parastatal marketing boards, people in remote areas were
entitled and able to buy seed and sell crops at fixed prices which did not vary by season. With enforced liberalisation and the abolition of the boards, the poor people in those areas, and elsewhere, lost that protection and were once again exposed to cruel seasonal fluctuations in prices. The market did not serve them. It exposed them. Liberalisation made poor people poorer, and created conditions for famines in bad years.

The situation cries out for action. Drawing on their experience and research, Devereux, Vaitla and Hauenstein Swan show what has to be done. They bring together proposals for a raft of workable measures for social protection. Agricultural livelihood development is basic. Emergency and social protection measures include: nutritional and food security surveillance; community-based management of acute malnutrition; cash and food transfers; seasonal employment programmes; social pensions; child growth promotion; and crop insurance schemes. And these are costed. The question becomes not whether they can be afforded but whether governments, lenders and donors who are serious about poverty can conceivably not afford them.

To end seasonal hunger, rights and power are crucial. This is shown by India’s employment guarantee schemes. Poor people must have rights to make demands. There must be an enforceable right to food. The persuasive argument put forward is for a ‘fundamental transformation in the political obligations around hunger’.

This book is a wake up call. After Seasons of Hunger, things should never be the same again. It should be required reading for all development professionals – political leaders, officials, those who work in governments, aid agencies and NGOs, academics, researchers, teachers, local leaders and others – all who are committed to the fight against poverty. For all those who share that commitment, it is a ‘must’. Let us in the future always find ‘seasonality’ in books, articles and reports on poverty. In committees, meetings and reviews of policy and practice, and in research, let there always be someone who asks and presses the question: ‘And what about seasonality?’ Let that crucial, pervasive, cross-cutting dimension never again be overlooked or ignored. To achieve that, we have to start with ourselves, our own perceptions and priorities. To make poverty history, we have to make seasonal blindness history.

The development community has a huge, historic opportunity. It is precisely because seasonal deprivation has been so neglected that it now presents such immense and wide-ranging scope for attacking poverty. Any development professional serious about poverty has now, more than ever, to be serious about seasonality. May the right to food be recognised. May the measures advocated here be adopted. And so let us banish the hidden obscenity of quiet seasonal starvation from our world and make seasonal hunger history.

Seasons of Hunger shows how.