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How one season can bring crisis to the poor

By Robert Chambers

TROPICAL seasons are a neglected aspect of rural planning; and the hardest times for the poorer rural people are also the times when urban-based officials and experts least visit rural areas.

Following these and other conclusions at a international conference on seasonal poverty, the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex has been contacting Ministries of Planning, Health and Agriculture in Third World countries.

Its aim: to exchange information and ideas about seasonal deprivation and counter-seasonal programmes. It is hoped to share promising ideas and experience.

The multi-disciplinary con-

ference, held at the IDS at the University of Sussex, was organised jointly with the Ross Institute of Tropical Hygiene at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Forty papers covered the main seasonal tropical diseases and social, economic and administrative aspects of seasonality. Case studies were presented from the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, India and Bangladesh.

For pastoralists the most difficult time of the year is usually the late dry season. For those dependent mainly on cultivation — the majority of poor rural people in the Third World — the worst time is usually during the rains before the first harvest. But this is just the time of year when rural travel is most difficult

because of floods and mud, and the remoter areas where many of the most deprived and vulnerable people live are often cut off.

At this time food is at its scarcest and most expensive and the demand for labour greatest. Diseases, especially diarrhoea, malaria and skin infection tend to be prevalent. Hunger, hard work and infection interact, especially for the poorer people.

For women and children it is an especially bad time. Birth-weights are lower during the rains, meaning greater risk of subsequent death in infancy. Food is less varied and nutritious and more likely to be contaminated. Children are less well cared for. Adults and children alike may lose weight.

A study carried out by the Dunn Nutrition Unit at Cam-

bridge University in Keneba village in the Gambia found that women in the last third of pregnancy, far from gaining weight, on average lost 1.4 kg. in the difficult month of August.

Patterns of seasonality vary and the conference concluded that care had to be taken in generalising. Seasonal effects may be more marked where there is only one rains during a year than where there are two. Irrigation introduces its own patterns of seasonality. The failure of seasons may sometimes be more damaging than regular seasonal deprivation, which screws people down into poverty.

But some 600 million rural people in South Asia, and some 220 million in Africa south of the Sahara, live in conditions of marked wet-dry seasonality. For

most of them, the rains or monsoon bring a time which for the poorer people is hungry, sick and also often largely unseen by urban officials or visitors from overseas.

It is also a time when poor people are vulnerable to becoming poorer. A sickness at this time can mean a failure to plant, weed or harvest. Food shortages can force families into debt from which they may never be able to escape. Land may be mortgaged or sold. Helping people to help themselves to get through this period of crisis may present one way of preventing impoverishment.

The conference identified practical implications. They were especially clear in the health field, indicating preventive and curative measures during the

rains, when many people most need to work, and when the cost to them of not working is often highest.

Others included public works, the maintenance of food stocks, organising child care at times of high demand for women's labour, irrigation, and measures to spread the flows of food and income to poorer households more adequately round the year.

Correspondence on this subject is welcome and should be addressed to Robert Chambers and Richard Longhurst at IDS.

A report on the conference entitled "Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty: Analysis and Practical Implications", IDS Discussion Paper 142, (28 pages) is available from: Communications, IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE cost £1.00.