

Monga eradication claim not entirely true: Yale University prof

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File photo: Poor people are waiting for relief/Collected

The government's claim of eradicating monga – a seasonal famine-like situation in northern districts – from the country was not entirely true, said Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak, an economics professor at Yale University, on Monday.

"Days before the harvest, people in northern districts eat less because of seasonal poverty, which affects their health adversely for the rest of their life," he said at a public talk titled "Innovations to Address Seasonal Poverty" in Dhaka.

"In such a situation, the government's claim that monga has been eradicated from the country is not 100% correct," he added.

Researchers from home and abroad were connected online with the lecture organised by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in its conference room.

"Less intake of food leads to a reduction in both investment and productivity. At the same time, it affects the national economy," he added.

Professor Mushfiq highlighted the findings of his research, saying that in many countries of the world, including Bangladesh, hundreds of millions of people are still suffering from seasonal poverty.

To address seasonal poverty, he recommended taking steps to facilitate internal migration when they are out of work. If necessary, he called for strengthening the migration loan system.

Professor Mushfiq said seasonal poverty is more prevalent from September to November and highlighted Lalmonirhat and Kurigram districts in North Bengal in particular.

At this time, he said, the seasonal poor are in such a helpless condition that they do not even have a bus fare to go to another district in search of work. In order to alleviate the seasonal poverty, the workers of the monga affected areas should be given the opportunity to migrate elsewhere in search of work.

Citing the findings of a 2014 survey conducted among 2,000 families in Lalmonirhat and Kurigram, he said immigration in the region has increased by 22% thanks to subsidies. The financial condition of all these families has improved and daily food intake has risen from 550 to 700 calories.

At that time, Professor Mushfiq said even though similar assistance was given in Nepal, there was no benefit.

Binayak Sen, director general of BIDS, who moderated the programme, said migrant workers are unable to send money due to various problems in Nepal's remittance market. Since they work in remote areas, they cannot even come in the middle of their work and give the income to their families.

He said migrant workers could work for a longer period if they were provided with loans for consumption or production in rural areas.

Binayak Sen said migration subsidy is very important for marginalised people. "If it can be done, the remotest poorest people will benefit," he added.

Mentioning seasonal poverty as seasonal deprivation, Professor Mushfiq said this deprivation has two basic disadvantages. First, victims are deprived of many benefits due to poor diet. A lack of meat and protein impairs the physical and mental development of children. This reduces productivity, which is detrimental to the national economy.

In the context of other such losses, he said, investment in agriculture and education declined and many poor people fall into a debt trap due to high-interest rates of borrowing.

Claiming that micro-credit cannot play a big role in alleviating seasonal poverty, he said many people in villages have taken micro-credit but how many of them have become entrepreneurs.

"If people have to repay installments within two weeks after taking a loan, it will not be possible to get the benefit," he added.