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Helping farmers in the lean season

In northern rural Bangladesh, the autumn lean season is the most difficult time of year, especially in Rangpur, where close to half of the 15.8 million residents live below the poverty line.

The landless poor in Rangpur primarily work as day laborers on neighboring farms. But in September, while waiting for crops to mature in the fields, there is no farm work to be done. Wages fall, and at the same time, food becomes scarce because harvest is still months away, so the price of rice goes up.

The double blow of low wages and high food prices means that households are forced to miss meals and also reduce the diversity and quality of their diets. This is especially harmful for pregnant women and young children, because it can lead to poor physical and cognitive development in the long run.

What's the best way to help rural farmers during the lean season? That's one of the many questions that Bangladesh Priorities will help answer. The Copenhagen Consensus Center project, in partnership with BRAC, is working with teams of economists to study which solutions across a wide range of issues can help Bangladesh prosper the most at the least cost.

Fortunately, there is a strategy that shows promise to help the landless poor during the hungry season in northern Bangladesh. New research by Mushfiq Mobarak, a Yale University economist, and Agha Ali Akram, a postdoctoral fellow with Evidence Action, suggests that helping people from rural areas migrate to work seasonally in urban centers can help families overcome the lean season. Spending on these programs can provide social benefits of four takas for each taka spent.

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