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B O O K R E V I E W

Poverty and Seasonality in Africa, India and China

Judith Heyer*

Devereux, Stephen, Sabates-Wheeler, Rachel, and Longhurst, Richard (eds.) (2012), *Seasonality, Rural Livelihoods and Development*, Earthscan from Routledge, London and New York, pp. 325.

Seasonality has particularly adverse effects on poor people in many parts of the world. Among the more obvious of these are the need to engage in seasonal migration, hungry seasons affecting poor people in critical ways, and health problems that peak seasonally. The book under review makes a convincing case for taking seasonality more seriously, focusing on the role that it plays in both creating and reproducing poverty. The authors draw attention to the fact that evaluations of the impact of seasonality on the poor tend to focus more on whether consumption and other essential expenditures are maintained throughout the year, and less on how this affects the maintenance of productive capacity for the medium and the longer run. They remind us that poor people faced with adverse seasonality usually maintain consumption and other essential expenditures at least to some extent by running down longer-term productive capacity, and that this increases poverty in the medium and the longer run. (Examples include the running down of productive assets such as livestock, the undermining of health, the sacrifice of schooling, etc.) The first priority may be to ensure that consumption is maintained. But one also needs to look at the extent to which the maintenance of consumption is at the expense of productive capacity. The authors also point out that adverse seasonality often leads to the adoption of sub-optimal livelihood strategies by the poor. Poverty is reinforced through this route too.

The book is the outcome of a conference held at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex in 2009, at which seasonality was revisited after a gap of 30-odd years. A similar conference, held in 1978, had been followed by publications that were thought not to have had enough impact. There was a need to visit the topic again.

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There was much that had gone on meanwhile, however, as the current volume shows. This includes advances with respect to the eradication of polio and guineaworm disease, and the reduced incidence of malaria, which seriously exacerbated the effects of seasonality in the past; and the advent of social protection programmes that could address adverse seasonality, an example of which is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India. There have also been setbacks, such as the abolition of food price stabilisation, reductions in the public distribution of food, and the privatisation of health care, insurance, and credit.

The book has a Foreword and a chapter by Robert Chambers who was one of the organisers of the 1978 conference together with Richard Longhurst, one of the editors of the current volume. Part 1 of the book includes chapters on the effects of birth month on child health in India; seasonality and HIV/AIDS in Malawi; and perceptions of changing seasons associated with climate change. Part 2 has chapters on the effect of irrigation on seasonality in Andhra Pradesh; seasonality and labour migration in China; seasonality and labour migration in the highlands of Peru; and a chapter on the impact of seasonality on poverty estimates, in which it is shown that where seasonality is not taken into account, poverty estimates can be seriously compromised. Part 3 of the book focuses on analytical tools designed to capture the effects of seasonality, starting with a chapter on seasonal Cost of Diet estimates, going on to a chapter on what is termed the Household Economic Approach (HEA) to the analysis of seasonality, and a chapter on Livelihood Impact Analysis Spreadsheets (LIAS) developed in conjunction with the HEA. Part 3 also includes a chapter on the analysis of seasonal water demand and supply. Part 4, the final part, includes a chapter on the use of conventional household economic models to analyse seasonality, with particular emphasis on the impact of seasonality on capital constraints. There is also a chapter on seasonal issues relating to education, and a chapter on an approach to seasonality developed as part of a programme to limit the adverse effects of seasonality on Chars communities (communities living on seasonal sand-banks) in Bangladesh. Part 4 ends with a concluding chapter that uses detailed work on the experience of the Ethiopian Productive Safety Net Programme to illustrate some of the more general findings of the book.

One of the most valuable contributions of the book is its account of analytical and empirical work on how poor people put together livelihood strategies that are complex and multi-faceted, with seasonality at their centre. Rethman's chapter on the use of the HEA in Malawi, and Bourdeau and Lawrence's chapter on the use of LIAS in Ethiopia give a good sense of the advances that have been made in understanding poor people's livelihood systems as well as the role that seasonality plays in these. The underlying message is that a holistic approach is needed, bringing in such matters as health, education, water, etc., as well as production and income-earning constraints. The analysis involved makes very considerable data demands. It is clear that a lot of work has gone into meeting these.

The book also has a good deal to say on tackling specific aspects of adverse seasonality: providing employment at critical times, controlling food prices, buying and selling back assets such as livestock, changing the timing of school fee payments and of school calendars, increasing health provision at crucial times of the year, and getting the timing of relief packages right. Some of these are more obvious. Others are the outcome of detailed analysis such as that outlined in the book as a whole.

The book pays less attention to more general policies to reduce seasonality and the impact of seasonality on the poor – policies such as the diversification of agricultural production, the expansion and diversification of non-agricultural employment, and the role of credit and insurance policies. The book gives the impression that too much attention is being paid to addressing the symptoms, and too little to tackling the underlying causes of the problems at stake. The authors of the Conclusion, Stephen Devereux and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler, go further than this, drawing attention to political economy and distribution issues, and maintaining that seasonality is a political rather than a technical issue. This is not something that is explored in the book, though.

Overall, this is a useful book on seasonality and its adverse effects on the poor, and some of the more immediate ways in which these can be addressed. It would have been more useful still if greater attention had been paid to the fundamental causes, and the policies to address these.