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Facing 'The Hungry Season'



When we at Trickle Up talk about helping people take the first steps out of extreme poverty, we typically use the shorthand of “living on less than \$1.25 per person per day.” That is the definition used by the United Nations, World Bank and others to measure the deep level of poverty experienced by the poorest billion people. But a simple statistic doesn’t tell the story of what it means to the people living it. Ask them how much money they have, and you will often get a vague answer—one that can change from day to day, season to season. Ask them how long the “hunger gap” or “hungry season” lasts, and they’ll answer you precisely.

The hungry season is a universal fact of life for rural people who live in poor countries like the ones where Trickle Up works. Lasting between one and four months, it occurs at approximately the same

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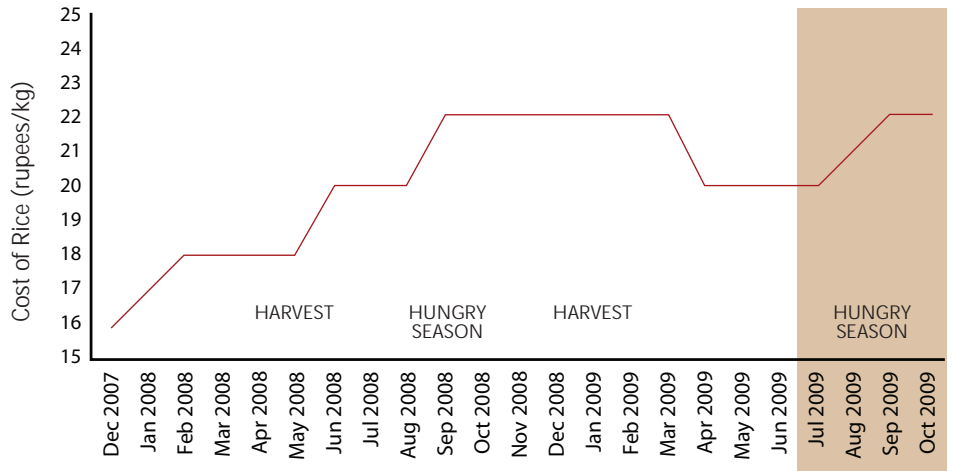


we seek from our program, an important measure is whether people can become less vulnerable to the inexorable forces of weather and crop cycles. When our participants start new livelihoods, expand their businesses or diversify, their income increases and is more consistent through the year. They are less likely to have to migrate from their homes during the hungry season.

When they contribute every week to a savings group that we've helped form, they have a place to borrow funds at reasonable rates when the hungry season comes or an emergency strikes. Trickle Up training programs help people learn how to plan for cyclicity in their livelihoods and household expenditures. Participants can pool their funds to build cereal banks that allow them to buy grain at harvest time, when it's less expensive, and then store it for use when prices are higher. When the harvest time finally arrives and food is more available at lower prices, they aren't struggling under the burden of debt accumulated during the hard months.

The results are palpable. A Trickle Up

THE COST OF RICE AND THE HUNGRY SEASON IN INDIA



Source: Government of India and FAO

participant in Wampiri, a village in Mali, explained how her Trickle Up grant allowed her to stockpile millet in anticipation of the hunger gap. "Our rice production lasts us for eight months," she said. "Before I didn't have any means to pay everything at once in order to have a stock. I could only manage one day at a time, from hand to mouth."

Another Wampiri villager describes the change in the quality of her family's meals: "The sauce has improved. We have more ingredients. After meals, we have tea. We don't ask ourselves how to provide for the next day's meal, because we have a stock to use during the hunger gap. It really is a remarkable change."

JOSÉ LOPEZ PEREZ

For nine months of the year, José Lopez Perez feeds his wife and three small children from the corn he grows on a four-acre plot and by raising chickens. With the money he earns as a day laborer, he can buy about \$20 worth of food every week, mostly corn, beans, salt and chiles. His family lives in a one-room adobe house with a dirt floor and sheet metal roof in Guatemala's central highlands.

Then comes the hungry season, when his small plot of land yields no food, and there is no work as a hired hand. To survive, he has to leave home.

Along with his family, José migrates from his native village to a large coffee plantation a day's bus ride away. The bus fare is \$20 per person. He and his wife work 8-hour days picking coffee beans to earn the equivalent of about \$5 for every 100-pound box they fill. On most days, they pick one box each. If it rains, they cannot work and earn nothing.

"There are about 300 people living together in a large shed," he said. "The metal roof leaks when it rains, and the ground is damp all

the time. There are no sanitation facilities. Every day their meals are the same: tortillas, salt and beans. We have to buy our food from the plantation owners so, with that and the cost of travel from our home, we are unable to save any money at all."

"We are working just to survive," he said. "Otherwise, we would have to steal."

When he was a boy of 14, José went with his father to work on a similar plantation far from their home. With Trickle Up's support, he hopes that his children will have a different future. José hopes to use his Trickle Up grant to buy a local variety of turkey and resell them in the local town square. Selling one or two birds during the hungry season to generate extra income has been a coping strategy José and his family have used in the past during lean times. Now, his hope is to generate more income and save up enough to not only stop having to migrate every year just to survive, but also to build a proper home for his family. "That is a real dream," he said.



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