Sapcharibaro, were the first to describe to me the daily reality of living through a food crisis. The women, draped in their beautiful trademark scarves and with babies in their laps, gathered at their village's para centre, a pre-school and community health clinic. Surrounded by posters detailing immunizations and a map of the village pinned to the wall, Shashimala shared her difficulty coping with the higher cost of food.

"I used to be able to buy 250 millilitres of oil for 10 to 12 taka," she said. "Now it costs 25-30 taka. I still make with I did before but everything else has gotten more expensive."

The women sitting on the reed mats around her clucked in agreement.

"I only eat twice a day," added Mayadevi Chakma. "It's good that it's winter. The days are short, so you go to bed early. It doesn't matter if you are hungry if you are sleeping. In the summer, when the days are longer, it's extremely tough."

performing "jhum," or slash and burn agriculture, and by working as day labourers. For a period of three years, from June 2002- May 2005, ten women from the village, worked on a Rural Road Maintenance Programme (RMP) funded by UNWFP. In exchange for paving the small road that runs through their village, the women were given three kilos of rice per day and a daily cash stipend of 20 taka, part of which they were required to save. The women were also provided with training on health and sanitation, food and nutrition, basic literacy and mathematics and ways of generating income.

The RMP participants were proud of their road, which winds through the village in a line of neat red bricks.

"Every time we look at it, we feel happy," said Rangamilla Chakma, a friendly woman with long black hair and a wide, crooked smile. "When it's rainy season it doesn't get very muddy."

They were also proud of what they did with their earnings.





An enormous rat infestation in certain parts of the region has destroyed the past two harvests for many rural villagers forcing them to scavenge for wild plants and roots.

Paramaswaya Chakma, a mother of three, recently had to stop sending her children to class because she can no longer afford to pay their fees. The UNWFP estimates that some 20 per cent of people affected by the high food prices country-wide have also been forced to pull their children out of school. Among the mothers of Sapcharibaro the number was much higher. Of the sixteen women present, all but three raised their hands when asked who had to stop their children's education because of the food prices. The universal desire for a better life for one's children, and education as the way of achieving that, was not lost on the women.

"I feel really bad," said Paramaswaya. "It hurts that I can't send my children to school."

And then she turned and looked at her friends. "Of course it hurts," she said.

Most of the women and their husbands eke out a living by

Some of the women made small improvements in their lives, such as buying tin roofs for their homes. Most used their savings to start small businesses, like growing vegetables to sell at market. Others, like Rangamilla, bought animals. Rangamilla purchased a small calf, which eventually grew up to produce milk. Over time, she was able to save enough money from the sale of milk to buy the bricks and cement to construct her family a sturdy home and purchase a small plot of land where she could cultivate food. In the back of the house, near the eggplants she grows on vines, Rangamilla keeps a large basket of rice that contains last year's harvest. At 210 kilos, it's enough to feed her family of five for three months. Though times are tough and Rangamilla and her family can no longer afford to buy protein, like meat or fish, like savings in the bank, at least there is rice.