Rethinking “development”: Land dispossession for the Rampal power plant in Bangladesh

Muhammad Shifuddin Mahmud, Dik Roth, Jeroen Warner

ABSTRACT

In this article, we critically review the developmental claims made for the construction of the Rampal power plant in southwestern Bangladesh, in the light of evidence about transformations of land control related to this construction project. Land has become a heavily contested resource in the salinity-intruded southwestern coastal area of Bangladesh. Changes in land control for the construction of the Rampal power plant and similar projects have intensified decades of struggles over rights and access to land. The Rampal project is labelled as “development” and claims to contribute to the elimination of poverty. However, we find that, in reality, this project leads to a reorganization of land control, rights and access in ways that perpetuate and intensify waves of eviction and exclusion of small landholders and landless laborers, thus threatening agriculture-based rural livelihoods. We analyze how four actor groups involved in land control are differently affected by the project interventions, embedded in the context of historical land tenure developments. We find that the benefits of this “development”, primarily favoring rich and powerful social groups and investors, necessitates a critical rethinking of Bangladesh’s development and its claims of poverty elimination in the light of related land control practices.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is facing challenges of population growth, poverty, political instability, climate change, and extreme weather events. Especially changes in the densely populated coastal zone illustrate that, in practice, ‘development’ means different things for different people. The Bangladesh government has predicated its campaign on a platform of national development and megaprojects like the Rampal coal-fired power plant and the Dhaka underground, eyeing Bangladesh’s 50th independence anniversary in 2021 to declare the country a middle-income country. However, the brand of development pursued is not without its critics. The Rampal power plant in Bagerhat District, southwestern Bangladesh, discussed in this article, is highly controversial (see e.g. Misra and Mookerjea, 2017). For one, the project’s proximity to the world’s largest wetland, the Sundarbans, has environmentalists up in arms. A national platform, the National Committee to Protect Oil Gas Mineral Resources Power and Ports (NCBD), resists the project on conservationist grounds and commissioned scathing independent expert judgment, while transnational campaigning led to its discussion at the Global Economic Forum in Davos and moved climate celebrity Al Gore to beseech Bangladesh’s Sheikh Hasina to stop the project.1

The present article critically engages, more fundamentally, with justifications for the construction of the Rampal power plant in terms of its purported contributions to development. These are rarely discussed in such campaigns, and certainly did not feature in the Environmental Impact Assessment for the project.2 While not denying that this project may stimulate regional investments and create some employment opportunities, we focus on its murkier aspects: how it perpetuates existing patterns of land control based on dispossession of the agrarian poor. At least around Rampal, the industry-based development paradigm may, in the future, even lead to deeper transformations by further reducing agriculture-based and aquaculture-based labour and livelihood opportunities. Echoing Sassen’s (2010) qualification of development as a...
‘savage sorting of winners and losers’, we argue that the power plant project and the industrial development model it claims to represent produce many losers by excluding and disposessing people from the land they depend on. Such land transfers reproduce and strengthen existing inequalities, power relations and exploitation. They importantly involve illegal means, including corruption, threats and violence. Those who lose out are expelled or relocated, and further marginalized by neglect in this ‘development’ drive. We will show this through an analysis of project-related land transfers and practices of dispossession and exclusion, and the consequences for the lives of poor and marginalized sections of the rural population.

Criticism of the ambiguities of development is not new, of course, and has been eloquently expressed by authors like Crush (1995); Escobar (1994); Ferguson (1990), and Lewis and Mosse (2006). We do not seek to repeat such debates. Rather, we critically examine the developmental claims made by the Government of Bangladesh for the Rampal project, by confronting these with a critical empirical analysis of land acquisition practices and changing land control on which this model is based. Our analysis of land transfer practices for the power plant exposes the land transactions around its construction, and the consequences for the poor and landless whose livelihoods depend on secure access to land. On the basis of this analysis we will argue that a critical re-thinking of this emerging power plant-pioneered type of development is urgently needed. As this issue is seldom researched and hardly publicly debated in Bangladesh, with this case study of the Rampal power plant we aim to contribute to a more critical understanding of the problematic relationships between development ideologies and the practices of land acquisition and control that they set going.

The article proceeds as follows: after this introduction, we first discuss how issues of land control and dispossession are approached in the literature and in this article, including research methodology. Section 3 describes the background and context of shrimp farming, power-plant-led industrialization, and the Rampal case. The next section presents our findings on the land control dynamics around the Rampal project area. We structure our analysis by focusing on four major types of land control involved in the project-induced changes. Next, we proceed by discussing insights from the Rampal case study about the claims made for the ‘developmental’ character of the project. A short conclusion wraps up the argument.

2. Issue, approach and methods

2.1. Contested land investments

In the past decade, a key issue in debates about land investments concerns the ways in which property rights, land control and access to land are transferred from local populations to foreign enterprises for agricultural or other uses. The impacts of such ‘land grabs’ have been extensively documented, gradually also bringing in the nuances (see e.g. Borras et al., 2011; Borras and Franco, 2012; GRAIN, 2008; Kaag and Zoomers, 2014; Allan et al., 2013). The perpetrators of land grabs are neither all foreign, nor always private companies from ‘the North’. States receiving investors can be active facilitators of land transfers, while not only western private companies but also foreign state enterprises or companies from the Middle East, Asia or elsewhere are often involved. Further, the boundaries between ‘external’ perpetrators and ‘community’ victims are often fuzzy, as the latter are often internally divided along lines of interests, identities, and power, while patron-client relations, interest networks and power relations cross community boundaries.

Notwithstanding these nuances, the resulting changes in land control often entail transfers of control, exclusion and dispossession of those lacking the power and agency to defend their land rights. In South Asia, the growing impact of state-initiated and state-facilitated investments, justified in terms of development, is clearly visible. From the 1970s, India saw many protest movements against land dispossession, mainly for public sector investments and infrastructure, then still euphemistically called ‘development-induced displacement’ (Levien, 2018: 1). In post-1992 India, the character of dispossession (defined by Levien as ‘a social relation of coercive redistribution’; 2018, 4) has crucially changed towards state facilitation of private corporate investments. While these continue to be justified as developmental, they can also be seen as ‘dispossession without development’ (Levien, 2018) or ‘everyday forms of land grabbing’, mainly targeting weaker groups in society (Adnan, 2016). A ‘predatory theory of dispossession’ (Levien, 2018), then, looks beyond the narratives of national progress and development, while focusing attention on dispossession.

2.2. Land, exclusion and dispossession in Bangladesh

The predatory dimensions of ‘developmental’ investments also characterize the Rampal power plant case. Like India, Bangladesh is undergoing rapid agrarian transformations, with important consequences for how, to what purposes, and by whom land is controlled and used. In southwestern Bangladesh, rural producers have massively shifted from food crops into export-oriented fishpond-based shrimp and prawn cultivation, influenced by internationalizing markets. Export-oriented aquaculture production zones have not only caused environmental degradation —invoking the spectre of a ‘desert in the delta’ (Swapan and Gavvin, 2011)— but also radical changes in land control, concentrating landownership in the hands of powerful elites (see Adnan, 2013). More recent trends show de-agrarianization, involving rural development pathways in which agricultural and aquacultural land is accumulated for infrastructural and industrial investments. Thus, the growing embeddedness of rural Bangladesh in global capitalist production influences food security, food sovereignty and the occurrence of malnutrition (Edelman et al., 2014; Misra, 2017, 2018; Mookerjea and Misra, 2017; Paprocki and Cons, 2014).

These processes push out smallholders and marginal farmers, intensifying land-related political conflicts (Adnan, 2013; Afroz et al., 2017). Often predatory elites and bureaucrats, corruption, and the use of threats, force and violence are involved (Adnan, 2013; Feldman and Geisler, 2012). Land conflicts and land alienation through exclusion and dispossession have become increasingly well documented. Adnan (2013, for instance, analyses deltaic land grabs as processes of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession. The same author (Adnan, 2016) has argued that land alienation in Bangladesh requires scientific attention to how it is produced: by a variety of actors, processes, and mechanisms, in complex interactions of neoliberal globalization, state policies and interventions, and involving power struggles, threats, violence, and resistance. Land alienation mechanisms can, for instance, be coercive or voluntary, direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional, and market-based or nonmarket-based (Adnan, 2013, 2016); Feldman and Geisler (2012: 1971) stress the importance of paying more attention to loss of land and livelihoods, and human displacement through the ‘more banal, less legible dealings that are internal to particular national contexts’. The authors relate in-situ and ex-situ displacement to corruption, political instability, class politics, crony capitalism and collusion between politicians, bureaucrats and legal institutions. Landlessness, unstable land access and displacement are aggravated by the influence of climate change on the quantity and quality of agricultural land (Paprocki and Cons, 2014; Routledge, 2015).

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2011) categorizes land on the basis of land holding. Absolute landlessness refers to people who do not hold any land (homestead or operated). ‘Non-farm holding’ refers to the ‘functionally landless’.

3 A techno-economic unit of agricultural production under single management … without regard to title, legal form or size.’ (BBS, 2011:13).
referred to households which have neither cultivated nor operated land or have cultivated land less than 0.05 acre (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2011). For ‘farm holding’, there are three categories: small, medium and large. The first refers to holdings between 0.05 and 2.49 acres, in which ‘marginal’ land holdings, between 0.05 and 0.49 acres, are also included. ‘Medium farm holdings’ have a size between 2.50 and 7.49 acres (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2011). ‘Large farm holdings’ have a size of 7.50 acres and above (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2011). The World Bank (2002) has estimated that around 48 % of the rural population of Bangladesh is functionally landless (Paprocki and Cons, 2014). Aggregate data suggest ongoing land concentration but do not show a clear trend of outright dispossession of smallholder peasants (Misra, 2017: 605). 3 Dispossession, however, is a key dimension of the Rampal case discussed here.

2.3 Conceptual approach and research methods

Following Peluso and Lund (2011: 668), we see ‘land control’ as ‘practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming, and exclusion for some time’. The authors distinguish various mechanisms available for actors to control land: (1) primitive accumulation, enclosure and privatization; (2) territorialization; (3) legalization; (4) force and violence. Legal discourses, often framed in terms of ‘property’, are central to these processes, to authorize, justify, normalize, enforce or contest land control. ‘Property’, theorized in legal anthropology as bundles of rights, restrictions and obligations with regard to resources (von Benda-Beckmann et al., 2006), opens up avenues in analysing (social) property relations beyond simple ‘ownership’. Further, it allows analysis of property as ‘layered’, distinguishing between property ideologies, categorical (formalized; legal-institutional) manifestations of property (as, for instance, in law), and concretized social relations and practices around property in specific contexts.

Ribot and Peluso (2003) move beyond an exclusive property focus, ‘putting property in its place’ (2003: 155), as there are more ways to establish, maintain or expand land control. Access theory, with ‘access’ defined as the ‘ability to benefit’, usefully broadens the perspective. The authors distinguish several processes and —rights-based (legal and illegal) as well as structural and relational— mechanisms for establishing, maintaining or expanding access (see also Sikor and Lund, 2009; for Bangladesh, see Afroz et al., 2017). Hall et al. (2011) explore land control through the prism of exclusion. ‘Exclusion’, ‘the ways in which people are prevented from benefiting from things’ (2011: 7), is not only the opposite of access, but also a crucial dimension of property, its making and its transformations. It is ‘double edged’: while functional in tenure systems, its exclusionary effects may create contestation, conflict and livelihood insecurity. The four interacting ‘powers’ of exclusion discerned by the authors—regulation, force, market and legitimation— can be researched through a focus on processes and actors (Hall et al., 2011: 7). With Levién (2018: 4), finally, we define ‘dispossession’ as ‘a social relation of coercive redistribution’. Dispossession can be seen as one specific form of ‘alienation’ or ‘appropriation’, a ‘transfer of effective or de facto control over land rather than formal or de jure rights of ownership and operation’ (Hall, 2013:1585; in: Adnan, 2016). Adnan (2016: 7) has developed a typology of alienation, which can be direct or indirect, forced or unforced.

The south-western coastal area of Bangladesh is known for its export-oriented brackish water shrimp cultivation (Ali, 2006; Karim, 2006; Deb, 1998). Its precise history in the Southwest Region is unknown. Local people used to collect wild shrimps from nearby rivers and started small-scale cultivation for trading purposes in the 1960s (Rahman et al., 2006; Pokrant, 2014). Outside entrepreneurs first attempted shrimp cultivation for trading purposes in the late 1960s. In the first half of the 1970s, this group exported shrimps abroad on a small scale. This got its pace through commercial cultivation from the mid-1970s (Pokrant, 2014; Tutu, 2006), thanks to higher demand from the global market, profitability and favourable government policies (Alauddin and Tisdell, 1998). Enclosure-like farms near rivers or canals were used to entrap wild fry with tidal water.

The current form of export-oriented aquaculture began in the early 1980s, under the influence of a structural adjustment programme (Sobhan, 2007; see Ali, 2006; Afroz et al., 2017). The number of shrimp cultivators grew rapidly, and relatively small landholders became involved in shrimp cultivation. Many landowners converted their cropland into fishponds, partly because of high returns and partly because of salinity-driven externalities. This expansion continued until the early 1990s. In this period, both local and external cultivators took control of local crop land, converted into fishponds, by means of grabbing and leased-in public and private lands. Land for shrimp cultivation came to be increasingly controlled by rich and powerful shrimp cultivators. This led to conflicts about land control (Adnan, 2013; Pokrant, 2014; Rahman et al., 2006).

To promote shrimp farming, in 1992 the national government formulated its Shrimp Estate (Molah) Management Policy (SEMP). Through the National Fisheries Policy (1998) it also encouraged private sector investment in commercial shrimp seed production. However, production trends gradually declined from the 1990s, mainly due to diseases and the unavailability of healthy shrimp fry, salinity-driven negative externalities on the ecosystem, crop-based food supply and human health, and conflicts about land and water. In response, anti-shrimp resistance blocked further expansion of shrimp cultivation in some areas, causing the ousting of shrimp cultivators and the re-conversion of fishponds into cropland (Nijera Kori, 2006; see Paprocki
In this context, the state has recently started the introduction and expansion of industrial activities in the southwest, especially the coastline, claiming this industrialization as ‘development’. In the regionalizing and globalizing economy of Bangladesh, big capital-intensive investment projects are on the increase (Khan et al., 2016). Through its visions (Vision 2021 and Vision 2041), ‘the government under the dynamic leadership of Sheikh Hasina is striving to turn Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed one by 2041’. In both, the power and energy sector has absolute priority. Vision 2041 presents industrialization as the key to progress; the power and energy sector receives a large share of the development budget. According to the Power Sector Master Plan (PSMP) of 2016, Bangladesh is currently moving to phase 2 of industrialization, and likely to move toward phase 3. While both phases are export-oriented, phase 2 is labour-intensive and phase 3 technology- and capital-intensive.

Significant land accumulation is required for this process: the government is now developing Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and Export Processing Zones (EPZ), provides incentives to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and relaxes environmental and other regulations to enable industrial development. Thus, six out of one hundred SEZs in the entire country are to be established soon in the Southwest region; four in Bagerhat District and two in Khulna District. This establishment targets acceleration of the country’s industrialization process to achieve a national GDP growth rate of 10 % by 2021. An authoritative body—Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA)—run directly by the Prime Minister’s office has been established to this purpose in 2010.

These developments are closely linked to broader visions on regional trade. The Southwest Region was recently mentioned as a new growth center, national and international trade gateway, connecting the area with countries like Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and (eastern) India. In this framework, the southwest region will become connected with the Southwest Bangladesh Economic Corridor (SWBEC). This transport trunk project intends to diversify the country’s export basket by integrating this area into a regional economic corridor, which is aligned with the international transport corridor projects under the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

In line with such visions, the government, jointly with India, is constructing the Rampal coal-fired power plant in the Rampal Upazila of Bagerhat District in the southwestern coastal area, with an estimated investment of USD 1.5 billion (Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), 2013; The Guardian, 2015). For its construction, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and the National Thermal Power Corporation Ltd. (NTPC) from India in 2010 (Ahsan, 2011). The agreement, signed in 2012, led to the formation of the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company Limited (BIFPCL), a joint venture company (Ritu, 2013). The vision also allows the establishment of industries in Rampal and its surroundings, especially in the Pasur and Mongla river catchments. Presented as a pioneer initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, and the Rampal area, this process is in full swing: the government of Bangladesh has accumulated much land for the power plant by converting shrimp ponds (Muhammad, 2013). It has acquired all land of the Sapmari Katakhali Mauza11 of Rampal Upasaila (1,834 acres), mostly shrimp ponds (Muhammad, 2013; Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), 2013). Before the land acquisition, 386 people, including absolute landless, functionally landless and smallholders lived here permanently in 104 households, with additional basic infrastructure like small shops and an informal school (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2012; Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), 2013). Of the total land area, 95.1 % was used for shrimp cultivation and 0.8 % for human settlement, including homestead gardening (Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), 2013). In August 2013, the Department of the Environment (DoE), the designated government authority, conditionally approved the construction (South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), 2015). However, land acquisition and other project activities had begun before this approval, and have continued since then (Muhammad, 2013).

Rampal is not an isolated case: in 2012, the government allowed a private company, Orion Power Khulna Ltd. (OPKL), to take control of more than 200 acres of land for constructing another coal-fired power plant with a 630 MW capacity (The Daily Star, 2012). Inspired by these initiatives, other companies began to establish industries in this area with immense profit-making potential. All these enterprises are in progress simultaneously, supported by some and opposed by others. The projects are expected to boost industrial and other investments around the Sundarbans area in southwestern Bangladesh.12 To establish, among others, sawmills, rice mills, shipyards, food processing centers and cement factories, in 2016 around 300 investors had already gained control over more than 10,000 acres of village land, by legal and illegal means.13

If this trend is going to continue, this will not just be a functional land conversion, but entail a more radical transformation of land control. It may further disrupt the shrimp cultivation-based land tenure system, nowadays largely controlled by rich and powerful shrimp cultivators. They have often gained control over land by enclosing private land for a certain rent period (hari)14, by leasing state-owned khas15 land, by grabbing private and khas land, and by benefiting from smaller famers’ selling of private land degraded by salinity. Although small and marginal landholders have been increasingly pushed out through these processes, many landholders (65.49 % of all farm holdings in Rampal were initiated nearby. This power plant-led industrial-type of development is meant to partly replace existing shrimp cultivation practices (by acquiring and converting considerable fishpond areas) on the one hand, and to increase the export basket of shrimp (by expanding the shrimp cultivation area and further developing the aqua-industrial sector) on the other.10

10 Expansion of shrimp cultivation can still take place where brackish water shrimp is not cultivated yet. Moreover, low shrimp yields due to diseases and natural disasters have often discouraged shrimp cultivators. Aqua-/ agro-industrial initiatives may revitalize this export sector more.

11 A mauza is a land administrative or revenue collection unit, in which land is divided into different plots in well-demarcated cadastral maps (see Islam, 2003; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2011)).

12 The Sundarbans is the largest estuarine ecosystem in the Indian subcontinent, with the largest mangrove forest in the world. It is located in Bangladesh (60%; 5,770 km2) and India (40%; 4,260 km2). Part of it has gained the UNESCO World Heritage Status in 1997 (Quader et al., 2017).

13 See https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/940471/14

14 Hari: a local system in which private land is leased out for a certain rent period.

15 Khas: land in the coastal zone influenced by river and tidal activity (so-called char land) that was brought under state ownership (see Adnan, 2013; Routledge, 2015).
4. Dynamics of land control and dispossession for the Rampal power plant

4.1. Aquaculture and the power plant: a new dynamic in land control

As described above, land competition in the coastal area has been considerably boosted by shrimp cultivation. Land conversion from crops to aquaculture had been promoted by the government and local actors who stood to gain from this ‘development’ model. However, the related land deals were largely controlled by political elites, thugs, business entrepreneurs and other powerful groups, pushing out poor, powerless, landless and marginal landholders from the land they had operated or owned before (see also Adnan, 2013; Afroz et al., 2017). These developments have also deeply influenced land tenure in Rampal Upazila.

Land tenure data in Rampal Upazila show a clear polarization in land control or landholding. Table 1 shows that 28.10 % large and medium landholders controlled 81.32 % of total farm land in 1983-84, when the commercial shrimp cultivation boomed. Although decreasing, this group still controls 63.55 % in 2008. However, the average holding size remains almost the same from 1983 to 1984 (17.29 acres) to 2008 (17.25 acres). This average does not reflect the actual field situation; some medium and large holders with political influence may actually control much more land. The number of smallholders also decreased, but their holding size remained almost the same between 1983–1984 (0.80 acre) and 2008 (0.81 acre). However, the number of non-farm and landless households had almost doubled in 2008, implying growing land concentration and landlessness in the study area (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2011).

Land deals for the power plant and other investments added another dynamic in land control: they pushed out landholders from their homesteads and livelihoods. Comparing Google images of the area from 2012 to 2019, a physical land transformation can be seen, followed by land accumulation for the power plant (Fig. 1). In the image, blue-lined area refers to the Rampal power plant, which had just been accumulated in 2012 and filled with sand later (2019 image). Spatial analysis on google images also shows that an additional 1666 acres of shrimp gher have been sand-filled (red lines in 2019 image after 2012. These land transformations are continuing and inextricably connected to the processes of dispossession discussed below. Thus, about 3500 acres of land including land acquired for the power plant have been sand-filled for industrial establishment until 2019.

4.2. Property categories and land tenure practices

According to the state definition, land is largely covered by two property categories: state-owned khas land and privately owned titled land. The land ceiling system (East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950) vests property rights to land above 33 acres in the government (Adnan, 2013). This excess land is defined as khas, and hence exclusively under state ownership. Beyond this simple categorical classification of land as property, in practice land can be operated, accessed or controlled in various tenurial and property arrangements, with or without state-derived legal entitlement. Thus, land tenure practices and their property dimensions allow for a much greater...
diversity than formal legal property categories, policies and ideologies would suggest (see also von Benda-Beckmann et al., 2006).

In this study, we found four major types of land controlling groups, affected variously by the changes in land control for the Rampal power plant: 1) entitled landowners; 2) absolutely landless people; 3) leaseholders; 4) powerful and politically connected elite landholders. People in these categories hold land rights and have access by several means: using legal documents, paying government fees, making a contract for rental or other arrangements, using muscle, corruption, political, institutional and economic power etc. Table 2 presents an overview of types and modes of land control in the study area, also showing the land dynamics in terms of the powers behind access and control, and the previous controllers of land before the project.

The following sub-sections discuss how these categories of landholders created, sustained or lost control over land, and what happened to them in the land accumulation for the power plant.

4.2.1. Entitled landowners

Entitled landowners have legal, state-recognized landownership documents. This group comprises non-farm landowners or functionally landless (with a homestead and/or operated land up to 0.05 acre), small (0.05–2.49 acres land), medium (2.50–7.49 acres land) and large landowners (7.50 and above acres of land). Before project accumulation started there were 11 non-farm / functionally landless holdings, 119 small landholdings, 14 medium landholdings and eight large landholdings in the project area (BBS, 2011). All had titled land, while for many the size of the landholding they operated was bigger than their ownership. Large landholders operated most land (including khas and private land). In this section we discuss dispossession of owned land; what happened to leased-in and grabbed land will be discussed later.

From the 1980s, small, medium and large landowners used to cultivate shrimp commercially. Small landowners have a diverse history of land conversion into shrimp gher. Some turned cropland into fishponds, motivated by high returns from shrimp production. Many also involuntarily transformed their land in reaction to its inundation with saline water caused by adjacent shrimp cultivators and politically powerful actors, often in cooperation with mastaans (see Roy, 2017). However, this group has always been struggling to protect its rights and

---

Table 1
Land control situation throughout Rampal Upazila in different census years.
Source: BBS, 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Non-farm/landless (0-0.05 acre)</th>
<th>Smallholder (0.05–2.49 acre)</th>
<th>Medium &amp; Large holder (2.50+ acre)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of holders</td>
<td>% of land under control</td>
<td>Average land per holder (acre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>35.73</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>28.48</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>19.27</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data were adapted and synthesized.
* Agriculture Censuses were conducted in these years; the 2008 census, published in 2011, is the latest one.

---

Fig. 1. Spatial extent of land transformations in the study area for industrial setups.

---

19 Shrimp aquaculture ponds.
20 For violence by mastaans (also referred to as mastaan), their connectedness to political parties, and their changing role in urban Bangladesh, see Jackman (2018).
## Table 2

Land control dynamics in the study area.

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Type of land control practice</th>
<th>Mode of land control (rights and access)</th>
<th>Powers of land access and control</th>
<th>Actors (s) (who used to control land)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Under control of owner</strong></td>
<td><strong>Legal entitlement</strong></td>
<td><strong>Legal document approved by the state</strong></td>
<td><strong>Titled owners</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Land purchase (buying land rights)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Use of political influence, muscle and economic (market) power</strong></td>
<td><strong>Regulation for khas land distribution</strong></td>
<td><strong>Allottees</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Land allocation by the government (legal document)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Regulation for khas land distribution</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perceived rights to khas land as poor</strong></td>
<td><strong>Non-allottees</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type 4</strong></td>
<td><strong>Granting of hari of privately owned land (verbal and/or written contract)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Local practice of the hari system</strong></td>
<td><strong>Taking hari of privately owned land</strong></td>
<td><strong>Absentee landlords</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Access to land against intimidations by *mastaans* and politically powerful actors. Small landowners could often only sustain their rights and access through shrimp cultivation.

Some small landowners had homesteads on titled land, or *khas* land, or on both types. All non-farm landowners used to live in the power project area. They were largely involved in shrimp farm labour, while some cultivated shrimp in small fishponds (0.01 acre and less) near their homesteads. Some functionally landless and smallholders had small shops for additional income. Land accumulation dispossessed them of both production land and homesteads. Land acquisition took place following the Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance of 1982, which pays very little attention to public consultation and stakeholder engagement in project planning and execution. The government gave cash compensation for acquired land to titled landowners only. Landowners were not involved in decision-making; the authorities prepared a Land Acquisition Plan (LAP), which was mandatory for all landholders. Although non-farm and small landowners refused to give their land, the state, often supported by interest groups, forcefully dispossessed them.

This process also dispossessed large and medium landowners, who used to cultivate shrimp, including political bosses and politically connected, often rich, shrimp cultivators. Initially, they turned their cropland into shrimp *gher*, perceiving the higher returns. Especially the large landowners increased their farm (*gher*) size by leasing in land (*hari*), grabbing *khas* land and private land, and purchasing titled land. For purchasing land, this group often used its political influence, muscle and financial power. Powerful themselves or connected to powerful politicians, they often used supporters and thugs for inundating the land with salty water or intimidating smallholders to sell land, with financial benefits or political positions for their supporters in return. While some landowners resisted and rejected compensation, many did agree and received compensation. They often acted in the government’s interest because of their political affiliation to the ruling party.

The 1982 ordinance provides cash compensation for those who lose entitled land, which is considered a fair way of dealing with dispossession. However, those who lost land are responsible themselves for restoring their living and livelihoods. The question whether the compensation is sufficient to restore at least their previous condition is not asked. This study reveals that compensation is often insufficient, with diverse negative consequences for landholders. First, the amount of compensation matters for the owners. According to the state rule, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) is responsible for determining the ‘market value’ of acquired land on the date of notice of acquisition. The DC gets the land value from the concerned sub-register office, and then adds a 50% premium of the assessed land value for Cash Compensation under Law (CCL). However, since owners usually report lower values during registration to pay lower taxes, the addition of 50% is still below the market price. Land losers in the study area received a compensation three times as low as the market value. Especially small or marginal holders loosing land tried to purchase land elsewhere, but the compensation was insufficient. Land prices have skyrocketed as entrepreneurs and land dealers are searching land, which limits options for purchasing land.

Second, the process of determining compensation is often complex and unfair. To be eligible, landowners have to prove ownership by producing a record of rights. The records of rights (in line with the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950, revised in 1994) are not always updated. Hence landowners often faced difficulties to ‘prove’ ownership, and sometimes did not even get compensation. Land losers must

---

21 Financial compensation for the Rampal project was given in accordance with this Ordinance, which became an Act in 2017. This updated Act increases land compensation to three times the market price. This is, no doubt, an improvement, but still does not solve the enormous financial and other problems for those who are dispossessed and have to adapt their livelihoods.
Mr. Polash, a smallholder, lived on land in the project area, combining khas and titled land. Besides, he owned one acre of shrimp gher land in the project area, inherited from his parents. Before the 1980s, as a subsistence farmer he cultivated paddy and other crops on that land. In the mid-1980s, his land was flooded with saline water. He and other small farmers tried to drain out the saline water, in vain: politically powerful shrimp farmers and mastaans had occupied the adjacent khals (drainage canals). Gradually, the area became a perennial saline water reservoir. Later, Mr. Polash transformed his land into shrimp gher. His entire (extended) family depended on income from it. However, they lost it all in the land acquisition.

Another smallholder, Mr. Hasan, had migrated into the project site with his family from a nearby village and lived there until land accumulation for the power plant project. Before the 1980s, he owned 0.5 acres of agricultural land in his village, cultivating paddy and other crops, and doing paid agricultural labour. In the mid-1980s, mastaans grabbed his land. He filed a court case to the local court to regain control over his land, which is still sub judice due to the inert legal system. To meet the costs of the court case and for his family, he took a loan from a local NGO. He finally had to sell his homestead land to repay the NGO, becoming an absolute landless. He and his family migrated to the project area, living on khas land and doing shrimp farm labour since the mid-1990s. His two sons also do shrimp farm labour, while his wife works a kitchen garden for the family. The land acquisition dispossessed and evicted his family.

Mr. Raja is a large landholder and local political boss of the ruling party. He and his family live in Khulna city. His family used to own 12.00 acres of land in the project area. Although the land (shrimp gher) is entitled to his father, he had it cultivated (crops) by tenants, sharing the benefits with his family. In the mid-1980s, he converted the land into shrimp gher and started commercial shrimp production. Its higher cash return inspired him to expand the gher. He leased two more acres of khas land and (through hari) about three acres of private land. Additionally, he grabbed four acres of khas land and three acres of private land. Thus, the total size of his gher was about 24 acres of land. He earned a significant amount of money from this gher, which helped him to become politically influential in that area. Although he lost all land in the acquisition, he received compensation for the 12 acres he owned.

Mr. Polash, a smallholder, lived on land in the project area, combining khas and titled land. Besides, he owned one acre of shrimp gher land in the project area, inherited from his parents. Before the 1980s, as a subsistence farmer he cultivated paddy and other crops on that land. In the mid-1980s, his land was flooded with saline water. He and other small farmers tried to drain out the saline water, in vain: politically powerful shrimp farmers and mastaans had occupied the adjacent khals (drainage canals). Gradually, the area became a perennial saline water reservoir. Later, Mr. Polash transformed his land into shrimp gher. His entire (extended) family depended on income from it. However, they lost it all in the land acquisition.

Another smallholder, Mr. Hasan, had migrated into the project site with his family from a nearby village and lived there until land accumulation for the power plant project. Before the 1980s, he owned 0.5 acres of agricultural land in his village, cultivating paddy and other crops, and doing paid agricultural labour. In the mid-1980s, mastaans grabbed his land. He filed a court case to the local court to regain control over his land, which is still sub judice due to the inert legal system. To meet the costs of the court case and for his family, he took a loan from a local NGO. He finally had to sell his homestead land to repay the NGO, becoming an absolute landless. He and his family migrated to the project area, living on khas land and doing shrimp farm labour since the mid-1990s. His two sons also do shrimp farm labour, while his wife works a kitchen garden for the family. The land acquisition dispossessed and evicted his family.

Mr. Raja is a large landholder and local political boss of the ruling party. He and his family live in Khulna city. His family used to own 12.00 acres of land in the project area. Although the land (shrimp gher) is entitled to his father, he had it cultivated (crops) by tenants, sharing the benefits with his family. In the mid-1980s, he converted the land into shrimp gher and started commercial shrimp production. Its higher cash return inspired him to expand the gher. He leased two more acres of khas land and (through hari) about three acres of private land. Additionally, he grabbed four acres of khas land and three acres of private land. Thus, the total size of his gher was about 24 acres of land. He earned a significant amount of money from this gher, which helped him to become politically influential in that area. Although he lost all land in the acquisition, he received compensation for the 12 acres he owned.

4.2.2. Absolute landless people

There were 31 households (30 % of 104 households) of absolute landless (BBS, 2012; CEGIS, 2013) in the study area. They used to live and base their livelihoods on project-accumulated land. Although landless, these people occupied state-owned khas to build their homesteads. They were mainly shrimp farm labourers. Some tried to cultivate shrimp on khas land near their homesteads but failed because of threats by powerful gher owners. Since this group had no titled land, capital and power to control khas land, they depended on gher owners and often had to work for, or maintain a good relation with, powerful actors to avoid their khas land being grabbed.

In principle, this group holds khas land in at least two ways: as allocation from the government to the landless (allottee), and as land occupied without legal documents (non-allottee). In 1972, the government promulgated a land reform law (Presidential Order 135) to distribute state-owned khas among poor farmers (Siddiqui, 1981). However, this Property Rights and Allotment Law was modified in 1974, making households with much land (up to 33.33 acres) eligible for allotment of khas land (Adnan, 2013). Hence the government allocates khas land to both big shrimp cultivators and landless people in an unjust field. Field data show that only 48 out of 4552 landless households in Rampal Upazila received agricultural khas land (0.06 acre per household; totaling 2.88 acres) as allottee in 2015 (interview, 2016). Although the official record shows an amount of 1578.03 acres of agricultural khas lands available for allotment, landless people received a mere 0.18 % (Rampal Upazila website, 2016). As a result, many landless people settled on khas land as non-allottee, while most khas is illegally controlled (grabbed) by, or leased out to, politically powerful actors for shrimp cultivation.

The local land office and powerful landholders regard landless poor who migrated into the area as dakkhaldars (encroaching squatters). From this marginalized position, they are continuously struggling for access to khas land with the land office, big landholders, politically powerful actors and mastaans. The land office strives to regain full control over land or lease it out to shrimp cultivators, whereas powerful landholders and mastaans seek a lease or grab for shrimp farming. The latter have detailed information about khas land: its location, who controls it, this person’s political affiliation, etc. This powerful group receives information from people in the local land office and other interested actors. In khas lease issues, this group maintains good relations with the land office, often sharing financial benefits with officials. Thus, the land office, big landholders and mastaans have an interest in evicting landless people from the khas land. Moreover, due to the negative connotation of dakkhadar, occupation by landless poor is considered temporary, and their eviction justified any time. According to the Ordinance of 1982, khas land should be acquired first when a project

---

22 Interview with representative of the Assistant Commissioner, (Land) office, Rampal Upazila (26 September, 2016).
requires both khas and private land. If a project acquires only khas, it will be transferred through an inter-ministerial meeting following the preparation of an acquisition proposal submitted to the District Commissioner and/or the Ministry of Land. Thus the authority does not recognise any unauthorized occupation, such as by landless people, in the acquired area, nor does it inform landless people or discuss its plans with them.

According to the field data, the acquired land was a combination of khas land (912 acres, 49.7% of total) and private land (922 acres, 50.03% of total). Although much khas land was controlled by powerful shrimp cultivators and mastaans, much was also controlled by landless people. As the ordinance does not recognize their rights to khas land, the government evicted the landless ‘occupiers’. Initially, the landless and entitled landholders, having a common interest, jointly protested the dispossession by demonstrations. However, the locally elected authorities, mastaans, ruling party politicians, state forces (police; paramilitary), and other vested interest groups intimidated protestors to make them stay away from such manifestations. Hence, entitled landholders connected to ruling party political actors gradually refrained from protests. Large landholders with positions in the ruling party joined the party interests, accepting compensation, seeking financial gains from the project, and intimidating protestors. Some small, medium and large landholders continued protesting and did not accept compensation yet. However, the landless group lost out easily because of its vulnerable position.

The authorities committed themselves to resettling landless and vulnerable landholders to their preferred locations. This study, however, found that only 18 out of 104 households were resettled in a cluster village in the same upazila, although the project authority claimed resettlement of all project-affected people. As the Ordinance of 1982 does not oblige the government to resettle or rehabilitate the landless, resettlement can be presented as a government service to the poor. ‘Resettlement’, as used by the authorities, stresses their generosity in dealing with people who lost their land. However, this framing completely conceals the government’s violation of the rights of the landless poor to khas land. In addition, the government presents resettlement as an unavoidable by-product of development, but never acknowledges that the landless poor tend to be the main victims. This is, of course, crucially related to political and policy choices made in land allocation for development, and to the power relations that influence these processes more generally. A typical reaction was: ‘these landless poor are in a good position, they got a house nearby an urban area […]. What did we get? Nothing, but we lost our source of income’ (Interview, 2016).25

In practice, resettlement provides 0.06 acres of (khas) land with a room for each resettled household. Land lease for 99 years is conditional and subject to payment of land development tax and other fees. The state authority can cancel the agreement anytime during this period. In contrast to their former houses with multiple rooms and kitchen gardens, the small one-room resettlement houses cannot be expanded. Moreover, the urban resettlement location hampers resettlers in getting a job, due to the mismatch with their previous rural experience and unfamiliarity with the new area. They cannot engage in project activities either, since they live far away without linkages to labour recruiters. Finally, the uncertainties of resettlement are enormous because resettlers have no access to urban khas land. Although the government issued the Non-Agricultural Khas Land Policy in 1995, it does not guarantee land allocation to the landless (Herrera, 2016; BLAST, 2005). As powerful actors usually occupy urban areas, where the land value is higher, access of poor people to urban khas land is very limited. Thus, resettlement leads to double exclusion: from agricultural khas land by resettling people in an urban area, and from urban khas land by government policies and realities of urban land control.

4.2.3. Leaseholders

Currently, three land leasing systems have been adopted by shrimp cultivators: (1) lease of private land (hari); (2) one-year lease of khas land with the option of temporary extension; (3) lease of khas land for over one year with possibility of extension (long-term). Although a fourth modality, lease of khas land for 99 years (permanent allocation), is found in the region; but the government no longer authorizes this allocation to shrimp cultivators, except to landless people. Furthermore, if there is khas land adjacent to an entitled holding, which can negatively affect the latter but also contribute to the livelihoods of the titled landholder, the owner can lease that khas land under any terms.

In the hari system, titled landholders lease out land to shrimp cultivators. After the contract period, both parties can renew the contract. The owner has the residual land right but delegates temporary use rights to the hari receivers. These are not allowed to convert land but can cultivate shrimp. The land accumulation pushed out leaseholders from their contracted land. If accumulation took place before the contract ended, leaseholders often did not get back the remaining contract amount, nor any compensation for unharvested shrimps. The khas land leasing system followed the guidelines of the Khas Land Management and Distribution Policy of 1997. In this shrimp culture zone, khas land was leased out to shrimp cultivators to promote export. In practice, leaseholders paid lease to the government to get legal rights to the land. However, termination of the contract pushed out the lessees and destroyed their prospect of becoming entitled landholders.

4.2.4. Powerful and politically connected land controllers

This category includes grabbers of both khas and private land, including mastaans, politically powerful actors and absentee landlords. However, project-driven land accumulation was a threat for them as well, as it re-allocated land towards industrial purposes. In the historical trajectory of land control, these landholders dispossessed small and marginal landholders, and the landless. Mastaans are always active in land grabbing, although they have changed their roles with changing circumstances. Commercial shrimp cultivation in the southwestern region was introduced by outside entrepreneurs (see above), who first connected this area with the global shrimp market. Later, others followed and, backed by local political bosses, introduced ‘aggressive’ shrimp cultivation by grabbing state-owned khas and private entitled land. Because of their aggressive practices they were called mastaans (Box 1). In the 1980s, when commercial shrimp cultivation was officially recognized and booming, these mastaans expanded their gher area by grabbing creeks, fallow land, private land etc. Local and outsider mastaans forced smallholder crop producers to surrender their land to them by intimidation and creating negative externalities (letting saline water into farmers’ land). Most large and medium landholders, often including local political bosses, converted their land into shrimp gher and gradually became participants in land grabbing, using the methods of mastaans.

Mastaans have significantly influenced local politics with their muscle power and revenues from shrimp production, and thus gained established positions in local politics. This gave local political bosses and powerful shrimp cultivators a strong social status, which they used to increase their financial gains and their power. Powerful shrimp producers-cum-land controllers maintained good relations with land office officials, often sharing financial benefits with them to gain information and access to khas land. However, this has led to violent conflicts between land grabbers and landowners, and among land
controllers themselves regarding the control (dakhal\(^{26}\)) of land or gher (see Islam, 2006). Mastaans without political positions often served their political bosses in land grabbing.

However, the power plant project has changed the game, involving mastaans in a different way. Many are now involved in land dealing as dalal (land broker). They often intimidate titled landholders not to sell directly to private investors, as they prefer to play a brokerage role between landholders and investing companies. Often they work on behalf of ruling party politicians or bosses, intimidating protesting landholders and informing the police about resistance. Thus the changes in land control have generated considerable personal benefits for those who control land. While the ruling party entrusted political bosses with the task of supporting the project, the latter ordered clients and mastaans to ensure access to sufficient land. Additional benefits are shared in this alliance between state and non-state actors. One example is the possibility to cultivate shrimp on a temporary basis on accumulated land, two-third of which had not yet been developed for the power plant by 2015. While those who had lost land and marginal shrimp cultivators tried to get temporary access to this land, they had no chance against those who are politically connected and powerful, and close to those who control the land (see Box 3).

### 5. Discussion

The Rampal coal-fired power plant project is presented as a cornerstone of Bangladesh's latest development strategy. In and around Rampal, this has started a new wave of exclusion and dispossession caused by the power plant and newly-establishing industries. Although pressures on land are growing, these developments largely continue earlier patterns. Like before, current transfers of effective land control (Hall, 2013; for Bangladesh, see Adnan, 2016) for the power plant involve various processes and mechanisms of exclusion, dispossession and displacement: direct and indirect, forced and unforced, based on market mechanisms and non-market mechanisms (Adnan, 2016; Hall et al., 2011; Ribot and Peluso, 2003), and involving both in situ and ex situ forms of displacement (Feldman and Geisler, 2012). In analysing these, we distinguished four major categories of land users: entitled landowners, absolute landless, leaseholders, and powerful and politically connected controllers of land. The actual property relations and practices in which these categories of land users are engaged are much more complex and diverse than those recognized in state laws and policies:

---

26 Dakhal refers to either forceful or non-forceful occupation, which implies the presence of power (see Suykens, 2015)

---

Mr. Jamal, a smallholder, owned one acre of shrimp farm. With acquisition for the power plant, he and other landholders had to move out, with compensation from the District Commissioner (DC) office. After almost all land users, including landless labourers, small and big landholders had refused to accept compensation and protested, the police, in cooperation with ruling party political supporters and mastaans, attacked them. After that day, Mr. Jamal left the village for fear of arrest or attack. Later, when he and his family returned, they found his house damaged by mastaans, so he decided to move again. He received compensation but had to pay a bribe to the DC office. With the remaining money, he tried to purchase new land. However, he could not afford the land prices, skyrocketing under the influence of speculators and investors.

Medium and large landholders like Mr. Salem and Mr. Faizul also became dispossessed. Initially almost all of them protested the land acquisitions in a coalition with smallholders and landless people. Later on, those connected with the ruling political party not only left the protests, but also started to threaten anti-power plant protesters and became involved in land dealing. Powerful shrimp cultivators among them took control of temporarily unutilized land acquired for the power plant, to temporarily use it. They could do so by payments, using political power, relations with authorities, or sharing of financial benefits. The smallholders, who used to own such land before its acquisition, could not get such temporary access.

A large shrimp cultivator who benefited from shrimp cultivation in unutilized land was Mr. Babul, then acting chairman of a Union Parishad. In addition, he also controlled a large shrimp gher adjacent to the power plant project area. When asked about the land, he argued that “we helped in getting the land for the power plant, and prevented miscreants from using it, following the order of our Member of Parliament”. 

State-owned khas land and privately-owned titled land. They involve the combined workings of processes and mechanisms of property creation and transformation, of access and exclusion, accumulation and dispossession.

The earlier, pre-power plant period of shrimp-based development saw both voluntary and involuntary processes and mechanisms of transformation of land control. Many farmers, big and small, voluntarily followed the booming shrimp market and turned their land into shrimp ghers. Others, however, were confronted with pressures and violence from local strongmen and thugs to give up their land, or were forced out of agriculture in a more indirect way by the saline ‘facts on the ground’ created by their powerful neighbours or others interested in taking over their land. This can be regarded as a form of in situ dispossession (Feldman and Geisler, 2012; see Adnan, 2013). Khas land, initially reserved for the poorest by law, is often allocated to well-to-do farmers, and then privatized and legalized in a way that excludes the poor.

While entitled landowners and powerful controllers of land are relatively tenure secure, especially landless people working khas land and leaseholders tend to lose out in the elite-dominated land control processes in aquaculture and, more recently, related to Rampal. Recognition and legalization of land as privately owned property tends to be easier for those with money, political connections and the power to maintain access and control of the land than for those who lack these resources (see Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Bangladesh’s land relations are governed by a ‘3D’ principle: dalil, dakhila and dakhil. Dalil refers to legal documents for the entitled owner, dakhila to receipts for land tax payment and lease, and dakhil to occupation of land. Dalil and dakhila are controlled and authorized by the Land Offices. In principle, landholders with these documents can exert control over land. Government agencies use their powers to legalize land acquired for the power plant company and turn it into legally sanctioned property. With the government providing legal documents, and the company paying taxes for land and leased-in khas land, private investors become legal owners.

As the government does not recognize occupation of khas land by non-allottee landless people, it is not responsible for payment of compensation. Farmers who lost their land by acquisition were either not compensated or given too little to buy new land elsewhere. Depending on access to state-controlled khas land as allottee or non-allottee, and often facing threats of dispossession by shrimp gher owners, the absolute landless were in the weakest position. If they accessed land at all, it was temporary and under continuous threat of exclusion by the Land Office, cooperating with landowners, mastaans, and politicians. Resettlement of evicted landless people often amounts to ex-situ displacement to the city. Leaseholders and land or shrimp farm labourers
were in a similar position, with the additional risk for leaseholders to lose part of the lease money and of investments in land or fishpond. Transfers of land to the project inevitably led to their exclusion.

While dispossessed landless and leaseholders have few options, powerful landowners and thugs with interests in land have more options available. Many of them had an earlier track record of using force, intimidation and violence in dispossessing small farmers from their land. As they could access and mobilize social and political networks to protect their interests, they tended to benefit from the land transformations for Rampal. Even if they could not avoid land alienation and had to face loss of their land, most of them received compensation, protected by their power, connections and political affiliations to the ruling party, and could thus capitalize on their (often illegally acquired) land.

What is new in these changes, and what just an intensification of existing structures of exploitation and land control? Under current conditions, we see mainly continuities with earlier aquaculture-based development. As explained, the new development vision prioritizes electricity generation for industrial development. Although the industrial model currently applied in Rampal largely encroaches on former aquaculture land, it is not meant to fully replace aquaculture. From this perspective, the local manifestation in Rampal of the current national development model seems primarily a deepening of capitalist investments and production into rural southwestern Bangladesh. Current modes of land acquisition and control build on processes and mechanisms that also characterized earlier aquaculture expansion. Property-owning elite-biased laws and policy guidelines, like the modified Property Rights and Allotment Law of 1974 and the Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance of 1982, laid a legal-institutional basis for current marginalization and dispossession practices for the power plant. Laws also allow local authorities to take possession of khas land, and exclude poor and landless farmers from it.

Depending on further developments related to the Rampal power plant, several scenarios are possible that could also entail a deepening and further intensification of these changes. We stress that these are possible futures that cannot be generalized beyond Rampal and its surroundings (but might take place elsewhere as well, of course). We distinguish two scenarios: power-based industrialization, and a combination of industrialization (including aqua-/agro-industrial development) with expansion of shrimp aquaculture. In the first scenario, power plant companies and industrial investors will take control of land to permanently convert it into non-agricultural functions under a private property regime. The planning and establishment of economic zones could further stimulate these processes. This scenario would provide an opportunity for external land dealers and corporate entrepreneurs in land acquisition, who wait for prices to rise and then sell to industrial investors. Presently such entrepreneurs are already active in the Rampal area. An example is the Lithi Group, a well-known company that has purchased land and claimed land in the shrimp ghers, and searched for investors. Part of the less productive smallholders and medium holders will be willing to sell land; the same goes for landholders whose land has been taken without payment of rent or lease. This scenario might also bring in more foreign actors, primarily from India as international partner for investments in capital, coal and technology.

In the second scenario, shrimp cultivators from outside will settle more permanently in the area. If shrimp cultivation becomes revitalized and more productive, this might attract new commercial shrimp cultivators from outside who take control of land. They might become an even more powerful group linked to aqua-industry and export, for which the government might even relax regulations pertaining to land control. In this scenario, dispossession of powerless landholders and land concentration will continue at a high pace.

The Rampal project represents recently formulated wider regional political-economic ambitions for the future, framed as of key importance for the country: industrialization-based development, maintaining good relations with India, and linking up with international (South-Asian) economic networks as a regional key player. If materializing, the scenarios discussed above would add a new dynamic to ongoing struggles between local smallholders and large cultivators, crop-producing farmers and shrimp cultivators, and subsistence-oriented versus predatory land control (see also Peluso and Lund, 2011). Despite promises to generate employment for the dispossessed, we found that the power plant creates more space for elite-driven land tenure changes and land control. Local institutions and officials take an active part in, and assist the land transformations, by aligning with vested interest groups. They do so, for instance, by assisting land brokers in land deals and by involving themselves in those deals for financial benefit and other favours from the ruling political party. The principle of dakhal mentioned above helps to explain this. Dakhal refers to forceful or non-forceful occupation (Suykens, 2015). It is more or less equivalent with ‘access’, the ability to benefit (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Gaining access requires enabling bundles of power, supporting both rights-based and illicit mechanisms. While the former refer to the legal entitlements sanctioned by law, custom or convention, the latter refer to ways of gaining access not sanctioned by state and society, such as coercion and grabbing, by maintaining good relations with those who control access (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Such land accumulation requires forceful occupation by the state, in collaboration with ruling party political actors, supporters, and mastaans.

Landownership, linkage with the administration and non-agricultural sources of income are the three important variables giving access to the rural power structure (Hossain, 2006). ‘Administration’ however is not a neutral counterforce to local structures. The politicization of Bangladesh’s bureaucracy, built in from independence, has been intensifying since the country’s democratization (1991–2006), while later reforms have been cosmetic (Akhtar, 2019). In Bangladesh’s rent-seeking political system, political parties have ‘pursued individual interests, contributing to the erosion of the foundations of democracy, governance, rule of law and social justice’ (Alam and Teicher, 2012), while ‘decentralization’ has worked out such that local power and decision-making remain conditioned by central control (Barenstein, 2000, cited in Nadiruzzaman, 2008). Unless wealthy, powerful and politically connected, those affected by dispossession have little to expect from the bureaucracy and judiciary, due to this political capture (Alam and Teicher, 2012).

### 6. Conclusion

As stated in its latest development visions, the Government of Bangladesh aims to propel the country into the middle-income status by 2021 and the developed status by 2041. To reach these goals, the country has put its bets on a strategy of national industrialization. It has identified the Southwest Region as a growth center and (inter-)national trade gateway into South Asia. This new development vision partly replaces, or adds to, an earlier one that was primarily based on (shrimp and prawn) aquaculture in the coastal zone. While this model has not been discarded and continues to generate huge economic benefits, recent developments in southwestern Bangladesh, with the Rampal power plant project in Rampal District propagated as a key starter, give a first impression of what a further move towards industrial development could mean for land control and the position of the marginal and landless rural population.

The Rampal power plant project, an Indo-Bangladeshi investment, is justified by the promise of developing a disadvantaged area, the
regional and the national economy. Power-led industrialization, currently in full swing in Rampal and its surroundings, is further shaking up existing forms of property, access to land and land control. The Rampal project and new industrial activities attracted by it require large areas of land. Through its acquisition practices the project threw the door wide open to mechanisms of political clientelism and mass dispossession, not only of the landless but also of middle and large-scale landowners in the shrimp sector, who lost their —often illegally acquired— property in the name of development.

From the vantage point of these changes in land control and land rights, interventions framed as ‘developmental’ like Rampal may rather be seen as counter-developmental, creating or perpetuating problems of underdevelopment rather than tackling them. Even aside from the serious environmental concerns raised against the project, in the Rampal case development is a change for the worse for the many under the promise of a future change to the better for all. ‘Development’, in this case, stands for political patronage, corruption, threats and the exertion of violence, which have facilitated the dispossession of poor and marginalized groups rather than the improvement of their lives. The ‘politicization of everything’ in Bangladesh closes off modes of redress for those affected, unless one has the right political connections locally or with higher levels, which, in spite of decentralization, have increasingly strong tentacles in local power structures.

The Rampal power plant is not a total break with the past but symptoms of a further deepening of international and global capitalist relations, showing both continuities and changes. We see important continuities with the earlier expansion of capitalist aquaculture-based growth. Each round of ‘development’, whether aquaculture-based or power plant-led, churns out large numbers of ‘surplus people’ (Li, 2011), whose land use is regarded as not having any developmental value, and for whom there are no jobs or other opportunities. However, we also see changes, mainly in terms of the (currently) more radical transformations in land control, new actors involved, new ambitions, and the impacts on livelihoods and social relations of production, particularly in aquaculture.

If we look beyond the state ideology of development and focus, instead, on its legal-institutional manifestations and the practices of land control and dispossession legitimized by them, we see a predatory form of dispossession without development for its victims (see Levien, 2018). There seems to be more than a grain of truth, then, to the —no doubt unintended— pun in the ruling Awami League’s self-congratulatory Power and Energy paragraph, which states that ‘... it will be possible to connect additional electricity to the national grid [sic] by 2017.’

Declaration of Competing Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Muhammad Shifuddin Mahmud: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. Dik Roth: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Supervision. Jeroen Warner: Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Acknowledgments

This research is an outcome of the first author’s thesis research at Wageningen University. The authors acknowledge support from the Anne van den Ban Fund (ABF) and the Wageningen University Fellowship. We would also like to thank all respondents interviewed for this research, and anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism and comments.

References

Hall, D., 2013. Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession and the global land grab. Third World Q. 34 (9), 1582-1604.