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Life in a Shrimp Zone: Aqua - and Other Cultures in Bangladesh's Coastal Landscape

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Abstract

This paper questions the possibilities of food sovereignty for producing a radical egalitarian politics. Specifically, it explores the class-differentiated implications of food sovereignty in a zone of ecological crisis—Bangladesh’s coastal Khulna district. Much land in this deltaic zone that had previously been employed for various forms of peasant production has been overrun and transformed by the introduction of brackish-water shrimp aquaculture. This has, in turn, caused massive depeasantization and ecological crisis throughout the region. Drawing on participatory research conducted in the summer of 2013, we explore the human impacts of this transformation. Through an examination of two markedly different Polders (embanked islands)—one which has been overrun by shrimp production and one that has resisted it—we ask how coastal communities have variously negotiated their rapidly changing ecologies and food systems based on their relative class position and access to land. Comparing these distinct cases, we highlight the multiple meanings that peasants from different classes ascribe not just to shrimp, but also to broader questions of adaptation, community, and life in uncertain terrains. We show that while food sovereignty in non-shrimp areas has averted the depeasantization affecting shrimp areas, it does not necessarily yield greater equality in agrarian class relations. To achieve such ends, we suggest, the dynamics of land sovereignty provide a critical and necessary corollary to self-determination in agricultural production.

Introduction

This paper questions the analytic and political project embodied in the concept of “food sovereignty” by looking at class-differentiated responses to ecological crisis in two markedly different polders (embanked islands) in Bangladesh’s shrimp zone. Much of the literature on food sovereignty creates a dichotomy with the notion of food security by making a strong argument for self-determination in food production. The implication of this work is that when peasants have control over their production choices, they have more choice in general—to lead healthier lives, to make more independent economic choices, to be more strategic about balancing subsistence and market integration. The deployment of food sovereignty as an analytic to examine the implications of such self-determination, however, is often over-determined by the broader project—embodied in the term—of resisting the neoliberal food regime. We join others in suggesting that such over-determination tends to problematically flatten critical divisions amongst the peasantry (Akram-Lodhi 2007, 560). In order to reinsert such differentiation back into the debate, and indeed to indicate why it is important, we here focus on the ways class radically reshapes relationships to food, to subsistence, and to hopes

for better futures within communities.¹ We do this by comparing one space which is ostensibly food sovereign—Polder 22, an island in Southern Bangladesh’s Khulna district that has successfully resisted the incursion of shrimp aquaculture—with one that is markedly non-food sovereign—Polder 23, an island which been overrun with shrimp production. Within these communities, we pay particular attention to those individuals whose livelihoods are most precarious – “the subalterns among subalterns” (Wolford 2010, 11).

We explore the differentiated meanings of food sovereignty in a context where landlessness, as opposed to smallholder production, is a central animating political concern. This is true in Bangladesh broadly, where approximately 48% of the rural population is functionally landless (owning less than 0.05 acres of land) (World Bank 2002), and specifically in the context of shrimp. Indeed, the central difference between the two Polders we compare here might be productively described in terms of access to productive agricultural land. In Polder 23, effectively, residents cannot access land for uses other than shrimp production. Narratives of life within the Polder highlight the social consequences of a lack of food sovereignty and a range of miseries linked to what Shapan Adnan has recently described as two-way or recursive primitive accumulation (Adnan 2013), whereby depeasantization is a consequence as well as a precondition of expanding capitalist production. In contrast, in Polder 22, residents have actively prevented the transformation of their agricultural lands into shrimp fields. In so doing, they have produced a context of, arguable, food sovereignty within which communities are more central to making decisions about the shape of agricultural production and market integration. Yet, as the experience of landless peasants within the Polder show, food sovereignty does not yield egalitarian social politics. We argue that such a politics would necessitate land policy reform more specifically focused on achieving what Saturnino Borrás and Jennifer Franco have recently termed “land sovereignty” (Borrás and Franco 2012). Thus, contrary to analyses that see food sovereignty as a radically egalitarian political platform (Martínez-Torres & Rosset 2010; Patel 2006), we argue that food sovereignty allows a full spectrum of agrarian classes to continue to be peasants, though it does not necessarily yield greater equality in agrarian class relations.

Equally important to our argument is the context of ecological, as well as capitalist, crisis. Khulna is a region in the throes of multiple overlapping ecological crises. On the one hand, climate change—both actual experienced forms of climate related transformation such as increased vulnerability to topical storms and cyclones, and discursive forms, such the support of iNGOs for increased shrimp production as a form of sustainable livelihood in the face of climate change (Food and Agriculture Organization 2010; The World Bank 2011)—has dramatically

¹ Our claim, of course, is not that class is the only category of differentiation that matters amongst the peasantry. Rather, we argue that it is one critical dimension in understanding the vagaries and differential impacts of food sovereignty and its lack in rural communities in Bangladesh.

transformed both the physical and the risk landscape for smallholders, landless laborers, and other peasants in the region. On the other, the transition to shrimp aquaculture in Khulna over the past 30 years has radically transformed access to land, quality of land, and ability to remain on the land. These twin crises throw the class implications of food sovereignty into stark relief. In this context of ecological crisis, a lack of food sovereignty results in depeasantization for poorer agrarian classes. The presence of food sovereignty conversely, allows people to remain as peasants, though not necessarily to thrive or transcend inequitable class relations.

Our conceptualization of food sovereignty is grounded in James Scott's classic analysis of the subsistence ethic in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. Scott positions the subsistence ethic as the technical and social arrangements that mitigate risk to ensure the survival of a peasant family. The subsistence ethic positions exploitation, or understandings thereof, as the violation of these arrangements resulting in a threat to household survival. The moral economy of the peasant as such is thus, as Scott argues, is thus "a phenomenological theory of exploitation" that revolves around minimum needs for subsistence security (1976, 161). Marc Edelman persuasively argues that Scott's argument shares key resonances with the food sovereignty debate. Indeed, he suggests that, in the context of transnational peasant movements, the moral economy of the peasant has been "broadened to the 'right to continue being agriculturalists'" (2005, 332).

Edelman's point resonates strongly with conceptualizations of food sovereignty in both Polder 22 and 23, where arguably peasant conceptualizations of food sovereignty generalize the moral economy of the peasant (the subsistence ethic) from the family to the community level.² Yet, the right to remain agriculturalists does not, necessarily, auger for more egalitarian rural politics. Rather, it suggests that the mitigation of risk through the provision of food within the community is preferable to the risks borne at both the family and community level by production that does not ensure the minimal subsistence consumption by the community. Food sovereignty equips communities in Polder 22, which has resisted the incursion of shrimp aquaculture, to deal with an ecological disaster, while the lack of food sovereignty in Polder 23, which has not, means that people are not equipped to deal with individual or community-level disasters. Our key point, again borrowing from Scott, is that the moral economy of the peasant in the context of food sovereignty, does not ensure a radical agrarian politics, or equitable distributions of land, food, or other goods. It merely ensures subsistence and the maintenance of the community at large and the class politics within it. Thus, our analysis confirms our agreement with Borras that "acknowledging such differences, rather than ignoring or dismissing

² Which is not to say that Scott's work is not attentive to community politics and relations vis-à-vis subsistence. Rather, we are suggesting that the notion of food sovereignty generalizes and reframes the concept of a subsistence ethic at a community scale. As we show here, this is particularly marked and critical in the context of broad-based ecological crisis.

their significance, is an important step toward finding ways to ensure truly inclusive and effective representation in decision-making and demand-making” (Borras 2008, 276-7).

Methods

Research for this paper was carried out in summer of 2013 and draws on over 100 interviews conducted in two villages in each Polder. The paper is part of a larger project that traces the experience of displacement and shrimp-aquaculture in these two Polders, as well as another (Polder 29) in the process of transitioning away from shrimp aquaculture, and a basti (slum) in Khulna City populated primarily by depeasantized peasants who have been forced off their land as a result of shrimp aquaculture.

This research was carried out in partnership with Nijera Kori, Bangladesh’s largest landless movement. It is worth noting, particularly in light of our argument, that the reform prescriptions suggested by land sovereignty are firmly on the advocacy agenda of Nijera Kori and its broad network. Nijera Kori seeks distributive land reform through campaigns for the distribution of common (*khas*) lands among the landless – a mandate already established in Bangladesh’s constitution, but which has largely remained dormant without broad-scale and persistent advocacy from community groups and individuals. Re-distributive land reform is sought by Nijera Kori through campaigns for better implementation of land ceiling laws and land use policies, along with policy advocacy for reform and implementation of share tenancy and land tenure laws, indigenous land rights, and restitution of confiscated minority lands.

The research was conducted using a participatory research approach we call community-based oral testimony.³ In June of 2013, we met with groups of landless laborers from villages in each Polder and worked collectively to establish a research agenda for examining agrarian change in Khulna and to train them in the use of basic ethnographic and unstructured interviewing techniques. For a two-week period following this training, these community researchers then interviewed their neighbors and other residents of their respective villages, capturing narratives, testimonies, and oral histories spanning the history and pre-history of shrimp in the region, gathering, in total, over 300 interviews and 153 hours of narratives.

In contrast to approaches to food sovereignty that take a broadly political economic view or constitute discussions of sovereignty at a national scale, this research firmly situates food sovereignty within specific communities navigating multiple crises. Our approach thus seeks to ground broad-based political ecological transformations in both specific locations and amongst specific groups. As Wendy Wolford argues, “theoretically locating actors within spatial

³ For a more detailed discussion, see (Cons & Paprocki 2010).

structures, and analyzing how the two are mutually constituted, is a useful way of incorporating actors and actions, as they are embedded in agency and structure, contingency and context, space and time” (Wolford 2003, 168). To this end, our approach at once foregrounds the experiences and analyses of individuals as key observers of catastrophic agrarian transformations and provides an intimate view of the ways that transformations in capitalist accumulation in coastal Bangladesh are constituted at both broad and local scales. In doing so, we further foreground a key critique of progressive political agendas such as food sovereignty that frame the agrarian question as a struggle for survival between peasants and capitalism—namely, that they risk being insufficiently attentive to the vagaries of intra-community inequalities and injustices.

Context

In the full version of this paper, we offer a more comprehensive exploration of the rise of industrial shrimp aquaculture in Khulna, but for discussion here, a historical framing is useful. In his recent examination of shrimp and primitive accumulation in Noakhali District (to the east of Khulna), Adnan writes, “As compared to the pre-eminent role of deliberate dispossession in Marx’s analysis of enclosure, the evidence on land grabs in Noakhali shows the operation of alternative forms of primitive accumulation, embodying different degrees of intentionality. On the one hand, there are clear instances of deliberate expropriation of poor peasant lands by private interest groups and agencies of the state. On the other, comparable outcomes have resulted indirectly from the working out of complex processes triggered by policy and development interventions that were primarily concerned with other objectives” (Adnan 2013, 122). Though the processes whereby displacement and land-grabbing took place in Khulna was markedly distinct from that in Noakhali, this description of primitive accumulation is also apt Khulna.

Beginning in the 1960s and lasting through the 1980s, the Coastal Embankment Project, a project carried out with funds from the World Bank and implemented largely by Dutch engineers, built mud embankments around numerous islands in Khulna’s delta region (Quassem & van Urk 2006). The purpose of the embankments was to protect the interiors of these islands from semi-regular salt-water storm surges and to transform the region from a food secure to a food-exporting region (Choudhury et al. 2004). The embankments facilitated wide-scale adoption of Green Revolution dwarf-varietal rice, which largely replaced indigenous varieties throughout the region.⁴ From the 1980s, structural adjustment programs in

⁴ This project was one in a long line of large-scale institutional projects designed to re-engineer the deltaic landscape that is now Bangladesh, shaped by various political agendas (Boyce 1990; Haque & Zaman 1993; Lewis 2010).

Bangladesh imposed by the IMF and the World Bank encouraged the adoption of export-oriented agricultural policies in the country. As Adnan (2013, 105-16) traces, throughout the 1980s, major international banks and development agencies began to fund and promote commercial shrimp production in Bangladesh, addressing rising international demand by strengthening supply chains linking Bangladesh to markets throughout the world.



Figure 1: Khulna District, Bangladesh

Beginning in the 1980s, cartels of businessmen and large landholders, primarily residing outside of the region, began to recognize the polders as ideal spaces for brackish-water shrimp production. In many Polders, the transition from agriculture to aquaculture was facilitated by

armed representatives of these groups taking over and controlling sluice gates designed to facilitate drainage in the Polders and using them to flood the islands (a process also accomplished by drilling holes through the embankments to the salt water outside. Once a polder is flooded, the embankment ensures that the entire area remains waterlogged (unless local anti-shrimp community groups or village committees can regain control of the sluice gates to let the water out), and thus there is no choice to continue agricultural production inside a polder taken over by shrimp. Thus, a project that had been conceived of as a high-modernist remaking of a landscape to facilitate agricultural productivity was transformed into a mechanism to facilitate new forms of capitalist accumulation at the expense of agriculture. Over the ensuing thirty-year period, brackish water shrimp aquaculture has come to completely dominate land-use within many Polders in this region, motivated by the expansion of Bangladesh's frozen shrimp export industry, which tripled in size between 1988 and 2008 (Paul & Vogl 2011). The encroachment of salt-water and pressure from powerful land-owners, often supported by both hired goons and local politicians, has forced many landless groups off of the land and forced many smallholders to either sell or lease their land for shrimp production (while many report being rarely or never compensated for their land once it has been flooded and taken over by neighboring shrimp production).

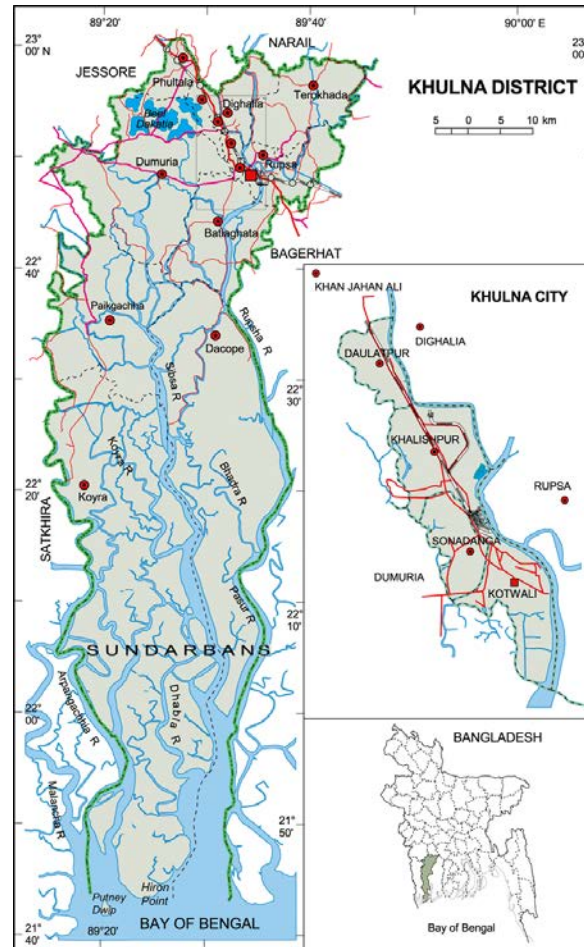


Figure 2: Khulna District

The environmental impacts of shrimp aquaculture, chief among which includes aquifer and soil salination (Deb 1998; Paul & Vogl 2011; Primavera 1997), has further contributed to processes of depeasantization in the Polders, making small-scale agriculture difficult to impossible in many of the most active shrimp zones (Guimaraes 1989). The social and ecological crisis heralded by shrimp has been further exacerbated by climate change in the area. Many of the embankments in the shrimp zone have been critically weakened by shrimp farmers drilling through the walls to bring in salt-water (Brammer 1990). This puts Polders with high-levels of shrimp aquaculture at heightened risk from increasingly frequent cyclones in the region (Barraclough & Finger-Stich 1996; Choudhury et al. 2004).

This is not to say that there has been no resistance to shrimp in the area. Indeed, Several Polders have taken active roles in reclaiming food and land sovereignty. Perhaps the most well known example of this was the landless movement in Polder 22, one of the Polders examined in this paper. In the 1990, a local landless leader named Karunamoyee Sardar was shot and killed

while leading a protest movement against the recent incursion of shrimp farming into the polder. Karunamoyee's death galvanized the landless movement in Polder 22 and there have been no further attempts to bring shrimp production inside the Polder's embankments. The absence of shrimp in Polder 22 has led to comparatively low-levels of landlessness within the Polder (30% as opposed to 84% in Polder 23). Moreover, it has made Polder 22 a safer place to live in the context of climate change, as its embankments have not been compromised by shrimp aquaculture. Indeed, as residents report, people from surrounding regions often take shelter in the Polder when the region is threatened by cyclones and other dramatic climatic events. Yet, it has also placed other forms of pressure on residents. Many landless laborers displaced from neighboring Polders have moved to Polder 22 in an attempt to reestablish agricultural livelihoods. This has taxed land and water resources within the island.

Polder 23

Polder 23 is a seemingly paradigmatic case of what is at stake in discussions over food sovereignty. A space in which agriculture has been completely overwhelmed by aquaculture, the Polder offers a vivid tale of the vagaries of shrimp and of ecological transformation—one that speaks of displacement, dispossession, and insecurity. Falling in Khulna's Paikgacha Upazilla, the Polder is approximately 5,852 hectares in size with a population of 22,307. 84% of residents in Polder 23 are landless as a result the expansion of commercial shrimp cultivation. Indeed, the vast majority of the Polder's arable land has been transformed into *gher* leases (shrimp farming plots). This transformation is apparent from even a cursory glance at the Polder landscape. In contrast to the intensive use of land in much of rural Bangladesh, Polder 23 appears to be barren. Brackish water stretch across the horizon, punctuated by short mud embankments demarcating gher plots and the stilted huts used by those who monitor the ghers to prevent shrimp theft. The remaining villages in Polder 23 are crowded onto thin spits of land hemmed in by brackish plots that often come within feet of houses and courtyards. Villages are in comparatively poor repair. While many *baris* (households) have tiny vegetable plots, residents report that little grows in them because of soil-salination. Chickens run through the villages, but it is rare to see larger livestock.



Figure 3: Views from inside Polder 23

Arguably, Polder 23 represents a space of ecological crisis, bordering on ecological collapse. Yet, contrary to framings of the region as a zone of climate vulnerability in which shrimp remains a viable and sustainable option,⁵ the crisis in Polder 23 is the outcome of shrimp production itself. Residents of the two villages in which research for this paper was conducted report that there remains almost no agriculture outside of shrimp. Whereas before the advent of *bagda* (tiger prawn) production,⁶ the Polder grew numerous varieties of rice, both indigenous and hybrid, now little rice grows. Residents report that freshwater fish cultivation—a vital source of protein throughout Bangladesh—is impossible. There is little land available for livestock grazing. Fruit producing trees no longer grow. As one resident reports:

[Shrimp production] started in 1983. Before leasing, people would grow rice. Many people built brick houses from the profit of selling rice. People used to have fish, cows, and they were very generous. When the rich people would catch fish, they would give the small fish to the poor people, but they do not do it anymore. Everyone is in crisis now. During 1985, 1986, and 1987, right after the lease had started, I have seen it with my own eyes that all the trees were becoming dry because of salt in the land. There was a storm on 23rd November 1988. After that storm [flood] all the fruit-trees have died, except for some date-trees. It is really hard for us to survive. If a woman wants to buy a sari, it costs her 250 to 300 taka. It is not possible to buy a sari, when you need to spend money on food. People constantly make decisions between food and other necessities, and most of the time, the decision about food wins.

The collapse of livelihood options in Polder 23 for the majority of landless laborers has a range of cascading consequences. Prior to the incursion of shrimp into the Polder, residents claim that it was possible even for sharecroppers and day laborers to achieve household self-sufficiency by combining wage labor with farming on the Polder's *khas* (common) land. Now, the majority of land within the enclave, including *khas* land, has been overrun with shrimp. As a result, residents report not just a decline in the availability of nutritious foods, but a shortage of labor opportunities, an inability to pay the fees necessary for sending children to school, and a marked increase in indebtedness both to local moneylenders and to microcredit organizations.⁷

Shrimp aquaculture has displaced many from the Polder. When asked about the residents of the Polder who had been landless before the advent of shrimp, respondents used words such as *dhongsho*, *bilputo*, *shesh* (destroyed, extinct, finished). Remaining residents are primarily smallholders who have been transformed into wage laborers as their land has been degraded

⁵ C.F., (Ahmed 2013).

⁶ Bagda is the primary form of shrimp production in Polder 23. Bagda are grown in brackish water.

⁷ For more on microcredit indebtedness in contemporary Bangladesh, see (Cons & Paprocki 2010; Karim 2011).

or they have been pressured to lease out their land and miniscule prices to larger shrimp cultivators. Many who have left the Polder have moved to *bastis* (slums) in Khulna city seeking employment in the brick making industry. Many others, as residents recounted, make seasonal trips to India to seek employment in construction. Those who remain eek out livings through low-paying day-labor in the *ghers* where constant exposure to salt-water and to the chemicals used in shrimp aquaculture yield a range of health problems from skin rashes to infections. Residents report that little *khas* (common) land remains in Polder 23, and that this land has been almost uniformly absorbed by larger land-owners involved in shrimp. As critically, the lack of access to *khas* land means that residents of Polder 23 now must travel regularly to Paikgacha to purchase household necessities—food, fuel, and water. The advent of shrimp has, as such, heralded a new wave of primitive accumulation in Polder 23—on the one hand, enclosing land for incorporation into new forms of capitalist production, on the other, forcibly incorporating the displaced into a set of asymmetric market relations and transforming a set of public goods into commodities.

If the lack of food sovereignty in Polder 23 has had grave consequences for landless laborers, it has also had significant impacts in the notion of community throughout the Polder. While moderate land-holders have, indeed, benefited from using their land for shrimp leases, most respondents agree that the influx of shrimp has eroded social cohesion and more community oriented ways of living.⁸ As one respondent put it:

Before people weren't always running to work in the shrimp farm, women were free in the afternoon and they would sit together in the fields and chat. During the month of Poush [December-January] you would look at the beautiful rice fields and chat with your friends. Now you don't have time as you are always running after money. Now you don't have the time to sit and listen to people. Before you had rice in your home, you had cows, you had fish in the pond. People were not as worried and were happier.

Residents of the Polder repeatedly make similar arguments contrasting life before shrimp with life in its wake. Shrimp aquaculture in Polder 23 has been complicit not just in the transformation of livelihoods, but also in the transformation of communities. Indeed, the shift to shrimp in narratives of residents of Polder 23 is explicitly framed as simultaneously a personal/household and community level crisis. Notably, this nostalgia for life prior to the shrimp was shared across class boundaries in the Polder. Residents repeatedly commented on the decline of community activities within the Polder, from the disappearance of community

⁸ On the transformation of social and ecological relations through the expansion of industrial agriculture, see (Wittman 2009).

plays (*jatra*), to the absence of sporting events such as horse-racing, to a loss of the leisure to spend time with one's neighbor.

Such nostalgic reminiscences would be easy to dismiss as romanticization, particularly in light of experiences in Polder 22 (discussed below). However, landless residents of Polder 23 were acutely aware of, and vocal about, the differences between poverty in a context of food sovereignty versus its lack. As one put it:

There is a significant difference between our current poverty and poverty in the past. In old days, we didn't have any scarcity of food. There were no leases in the bil (low lands), so were able to catch a lot of fish such as shoil, gojal, koi, bain, puti, and chingri to feed our family. We used to use special nets and an instrument named polo [made out of bamboo] to catch those fish. Since fish were available, selling price of the caught fish would not be more than 2 to 3 Taka if we decided to sell them in the market. But now these fishes are very rare and expensive. A lot of people that are ages of 25-30 have never seen some of the fish I talked about. One day my elder son asked me about gojal mach and koi mach, so I showed him a tilapia fish and explained that koi mach is kind of like tilapia mach. One day, I got some koi mach for him from the Paikgacha Bazaar, which cost me 17 taka for 250 very tiny koi mach. I just wanted to show my son what koi mach look like. In the old days, we used to have cows, so we could drink milk. We were healthy and had energy then, but now we do not have that.

Such framings clearly articulate an erosion of not just livelihoods but of the quality and security of life in shrimp producing zones. Indeed, even those who were profiting from shrimp expressed a desire to recapture agrarian pasts. As one respondent who leased his land for shrimp put it when asked about the future of the area:

I do not know what to say. I hope that the next generations do not have to go through this kind of hardship that my generation or I went through. I want to see the fields full of rice, backyards full of vegetables, and people without any hardship. Remember, I mentioned about another village where they do not have the [shrimp] leasing system. Every family from that village has fruit-trees. When we went there they cooked vegetables from their own garden, brought us bel (fruit) and milk so that we could make shorbot [a dairy and fruit drink]. They are happy. They do not have any problems with food. They understand the repercussion of doing lease business. Leasing seems absurd to them. If they grow rice for one year, they can feed their family for two years. I went to a relative's house in Til Danga a few months ago. In Til Danga, poor people protested against leasing, but the people that have 10-15 bighas of land [3-5 acres] wanted to

lease. But the rich people later realized that leasing is not good for them, as well, so they joined the poor people and started protesting against lease. There is no lease in that area now. I think it was a better decision for them. People can have cows, drink milk, and eat fruits.

The narratives of residents of Polder 23, thus, capture a critique of the utter loss of food sovereignty. This loss indeed links to both nostalgia for and desire to return to forms of peasant agriculture. This narrative is regularly and directly framed as a desire for self-determination, an ability to make individual and community level decisions about agricultural production, as well as a bleak vision of a future without it. The loss of control over land and production has had devastating impacts throughout the Polder, transforming the lives of those who both benefit from shrimp aquaculture as well as those who have been transformed into a proletarian workforce for maintaining it. Polder 23 offers an urgent portrait of the loss of agricultural self-determination. It is a space of acute subsistence crisis. The breakdown of Scott's subsistence ethic here, indeed, denotes the demise of peasant livelihoods in Polder 23.

Polder 22

In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, Scott discusses the “safety-first rule” which is founded on the mitigation of risk to ensure subsistence, explaining that “a critical assumption of the safety-first rule is that subsistence routines are producing satisfactory results. What if they are not? Here the rationale of safety-first breaks down” (Scott 1976, 26). This assumption that subsistence produces survival is also a critical assumption of the food sovereignty paradigm, which suggests that peasants are best equipped to mitigate risks and ensure subsistence through reliance on local food production, often through traditional production relations. As such, it is critical to examine the rationale and transformation of food sovereignty under conditions of crisis (ecological, as in Khulna, economic, or otherwise). Under these conditions, is it appropriate to assume that food sovereignty and traditional production relations are sufficient to ensure the “survival of the weakest” (Scott 1976, 43)? If they are not, what can be made of the food sovereignty paradigm in the context of crisis?

Polder 22 provides a compelling case through which to examine these questions. In the center of Bangladesh's shrimp aquaculture production region, the island known as Polder 22 is surrounded by other islands whose embankments hold vast tracts of industrial shrimp farms. It is roughly 2812 hectares in size with a population of 10,700, 30% of which is landless. In contradistinction to these stark landscapes, Polder 22 is an island covered in green. Viewed from outside, one can see an embankment covered with grass, dense groves of mangrove trees and other flora, along with people working, children playing, and numerous small homesteads within. In contrast to Polder 23 and other shrimp areas in the region, Polder 22 appears socially, economically, and agronomically analogous to other villages in rural Bangladesh. Residents of

Polder 22 as well as those who live outside are acutely aware of both the pleasant aesthetics of this landscape, as well as the wide-ranging benefits it affords its residents. Highest among the list of benefits offered by this fertile environment free of shrimp farms is the ability to produce and consume one's own food and other household requirements. This collective understanding of food sovereignty as an ideal is expressed by individuals in Polder 22 from across the class spectrum. To that end, residents of Polder 22 repeatedly articulate the importance of their capacity to produce and consume without participating in the market. One landless woman explained, "even if I don't have money now to go to the market, I can make do. But if they [in the shrimp areas] don't have money in their hands, they have no way to survive. But we can get by for a week. So there is a huge difference between our area and theirs." Another resident, a landless day laborer, echoes this value, explaining how this subsistence is made possible in practice, "just doing shrimp farming has caused so much harm to this country, for the people and for the trees... For us, we see that even if we don't go to the bazaar for a week, we can make do. We pick spinach, vegetables from the fields, catch fish from the ponds. But those who do shrimp farming, for them they don't have the option to grow their own food."



Figure 4: Interior of Polder 22

More generally, these statements also demonstrate the collective understanding that it is the ability of a community to produce its own food that ensures the subsistence security of its members. Importantly to the present argument, much of this collective understanding is based on the recognition that it is difficult (if not impossible) for marginal farmers in Khulna to earn enough money in their own communities through their own labor to feed a family. As such, the ability to produce the food and other necessities for a family's subsistence is what enables a small-holding family living at the margins to survive. One farmer, asked whether Bangladesh can achieve the goal of national "food self-sufficiency" (*khaddo shongshompurno*) through the shrimp industry, explains "no, not at all, because for every taka I earn, I end up spending 500 taka... There is no security [with shrimp farming]. You can't grow trees, there won't be any rice; you can't raise cows or get firewood or grow vegetables, fruits, anything. It's harmful in every way, the only thing you gain is a little money." We can see from these statements that the values created by food sovereignty extend beyond the relative market price of food supplanted by people's ability to grow it themselves. Food sovereignty results in a series of additional social and economic values which facilitate consumption and promote sustainable livelihoods.

The benefits of collective control over the ecological landscape, both tangible and intangible, figure highly among the advantages people describe of living in Polder 22. One farmer explains,

The trees give us oxygen and also during the months of Choitro and Boishakh (March-May), when the sun and the heat on our heads is intense, after working we rest by sitting under the trees. So sitting under the trees we get oxygen and we are able to live because of this oxygen. Our bodies also feel comfort under the shade. But in the salt areas there are no trees, no vegetation. Where will they get their oxygen from? When we have a big storm, the trees protect our houses. If we didn't have trees, we would have been washed away from this land, there wouldn't be anyone left in Polder 22. Just because of the trees, the oxygen, because of being able to raise cows, goats, hens and ducks, we are surviving.

This farmer's testimony cogently articulates the inherent relationship between a vibrant landscape hospitable to trees and other vegetation, and the social and economic life of its inhabitants. In this way, a political ecology of food sovereignty recognizes that the ability of a community to define its own agricultural systems is accompanied by benefits which may be illegible outside of farmer-based production systems. In this sense, "survival" and resilience to ecological crises may take on different meanings relative to the epistemological position which circumscribes them.

Beyond these ecological benefits, chief among the values of food sovereignty articulated by residents of Polder 22 is the ability of smallholders to meet all of their families' subsistence needs by producing rice, vegetables, and fruits on their own land. Testimonies from small and medium landholders in Polder 22 unambiguously demonstrate the value of food sovereignty for those with access to sufficient resources to take advantage of a locally self-reliant food system. However, while the benefits of food sovereignty to smallholding farmers are clear, how are these impacts differentiated across the agrarian landscape based on class and land tenure? What does it mean to be land-poor in the context of food sovereignty? In comparison to the landless poor in Polder 23 who struggle to persist in the face of adverse labor markets and rampant depeasantization, landless peasants in Polder 22 enthusiastically recognize their own advantages from their community's food sovereignty. One landless day-laborer explains,

If shrimp cultivation had continued in this Polder, then we would have been destitute, unable to eat, and left to die, because we would not have had any work. If I didn't have work, how would I have eaten? With the end of shrimp cultivation, we benefitted a lot, our village, my home. Now we have mango trees and berry trees growing within my homestead, and we can eat their fruits. Moreover, in terms of work, in the month of Poush (December/January), we can cut rice paddy, which we can survive on for up to 6 months. But if there was still shrimp cultivation, then we couldn't grow rice. So this has benefitted me. We are able to keep two goats and a cow. If shrimp cultivation was still continuing, I would not have had all this.

This farmers' testimony speaks to the many advantages of food sovereignty for day-laborers in Polder 22. Specifically, the ecological possibility of growing fruit trees for subsistence production, and the environment hospitable to grass for grazing livestock on common property. Along with access to these resources, the availability of opportunities for day labor provides this man's family with sufficient rice to survive through half the year. On this latter point, however, it becomes clear that even community "food sovereignty" does not prevent the poorest from dependence on selling their labor to wealthier landed peasants for their families' survival.

Thus, landlessness is a decisive category for determining the advantages an individual may derive from community food sovereignty, and is itself determinate of both the self-sufficiency of and capacity for a family's consumption. While some families considered "landless" lack agricultural land, they may possess enough land within their homestead to produce fruits or other vegetables for managing their subsistence, such as the day laborer quoted above. However, others lacking even this homestead land face more tenuous existence. One woman who, along with her husband, depends on day labor to earn money to buy food and other

household necessities, explains “when both of us work throughout the week then that is a good week. If we do not get enough work, we go hungry for 2 days, eat for 2 days.” Similarly, many day-laborers in Polder 22 articulate their experience of food sovereignty as distinctly different from that of most smallholders, insofar as it is not defined by the security and self-sufficiency afforded by stable landholding. The result is often the inability to engage actively in the collective social and political life that shapes the sovereign food system on which the community is founded. One landless laborer, asked about the advantages of food sovereignty and lack of shrimp production in Polder 22, explained, “I work constantly in other people’s fields. I never get to hear much about that. I don’t have the time or opportunity to listen to other people.” In contrast to smallholders who discuss the collective political empowerment that gives rise to and is facilitated by food sovereignty, the marginality experienced by this day laborer is evident. Inasmuch as food sovereignty represents an opportunity for collective deliberation and political self-determination, then the equity of that sovereignty can only be attained through the ability of all members of the community to participate actively in said self-determination.

Thus, we see in Polder 22 that while food sovereignty carries plentiful benefits for all members of the community, these benefits are acutely differentiated by class. The image of idyllic farm life proposed by the notion of food sovereignty of subsistence food production and production relations characterized by self-determination may hold some truth for some members of the community. But it is not shared across the agrarian landscape. For the landless and land-poor, the experience of food sovereignty is deeply circumscribed by inequitable sharecropping arrangements, patterns of circular migration, and often-precarious livelihoods. Many landless workers cite the “reverse *tebhaga*” system as indication of their relatively tenuous economic conditions. This refers to a sharecroppers’ movement in Bengal in the 1940s known as the Tebhaga Movement, which sought the right of sharecroppers to retain two-thirds of their harvested crop, as opposed to the customary one-half (the rest of course going to the landlord) (Cooper 1988). Under the reverse *tebhaga* system operating today in Polder 22 and surrounding areas, sharecroppers retain only one third of their harvest, even as they are required to bear all the expenses of farming, buying seeds and other inputs, and all additional labor costs. As such, most landless people in Polder 22 report that they are unable to recover their costs from sharecropping, and find it preferable to work as day laborers on the land of others.

In addition to day labor in the village, the majority of those who don’t have sufficient landholdings support their families throughout the year through circular labor migration. Some of them leave for extended periods to work in Kuwait and other Gulf states, though the majority migrate to other rural areas in Bangladesh for agricultural harvests, to urban areas to

work as construction workers and rickshaw drivers, or to peri-urban areas to work in brick fields. One day laborer describes the practice of circular agricultural migration:

Some people work in the area, but some go outside, to work in the field, cutting rice, they go for a month or two, then they come home. That's how they support their family. They go to Gopalganj to cut rice. The mohajon [money-lender] comes to take them to work in different places, they go away for weeks, or months. If they come home every week, the travel gets too expensive, then they won't have any money left over. So say if ten people go somewhere where they found work, they will send one of them to come back to the village with money for all the families. The next week someone else comes home, carrying money from everyone.

In addition to stories of agricultural labor such as this one, others describe urban labor, such as one laborer who says “some people also go to Khulna city to Sattar’s shipyard for ship breaking. Basically a lot of people go out for work. If there were more opportunities to earn in Polder 22, it would be more convenient for all of us.” What is conspicuous in this and other stories of labor migration from Polder 22 is that while landless men are continuously compelled to leave to earn money to support their families, their wives and children stay in the village, where social reproduction continues apace. These dynamics exhibit what John Harriss calls a “proletarianizing tendency,” though lacking the process of depeasantization, as such (Harriss 1987, 239). Thus, though the work of a migrant laborer from Polder 22 may often be identical to the work of a landless person who has been forced to leave Polder 23, the difference is significant: food sovereignty in Polder 22 serves to preserve the survival of the landless family within the agrarian landscape, while the lack of food sovereignty results in absolute depeasantization for the landless in Polder 23.

Discussion

These two case studies shed light both on the conditions of peasants today in diverse rural political economies, as well as the results and implications of contemporary rural peasant movements. As Edelman describes in his discussion of 21st century peasant movements, the political imperatives of peasant moral economies have expanded to include the right to persist as peasant agriculturalists (Edelman 2005, 332). For the landless people of Polder 22, food sovereignty has in many ways facilitated the fulfillment of this right, relative to their counterparts in Polder 23 and other areas taken over by shrimp aquaculture and the most extreme processes of depeasantization. However, even as food sovereignty facilitates the possibility for a full spectrum of agrarian classes to continue being agriculturalists, testimonies from Polder 22 indicate that this vision is insufficient to ensure the stability and security of their lives and livelihoods.

Insofar as food sovereignty in Polder 22 denotes relative autonomy from neoliberal agro-industrial food systems and capitalist export markets more generally, the community's residents are relatively shielded from the most precarious implications of transition to shrimp export production. As Philip McMichael has written of the current industrial food regime, "within the terms of the development narrative, rendered more virulent under neoliberalism, the elimination of peasant agriculture is understood to be inevitable" (McMichael 2009a, 284). Indeed, we can see in Polder 22 that relative independence from industrial agriculture has the remarkable benefit of facilitating the survival of peasant agriculture in that community, and that this survival is extraordinary in a region in which peasant agriculture has been all but eradicated. However, the class inequality which remains, and the continued instability of the livelihoods of the poorest, calls into question the sufficiency of food sovereignty as a theorized causal process for preventing all forms of agrarian dispossession, of which neoliberal development is only one driver (Adnan 2013, 123). In other words, if the point of organizing around movements such as food sovereignty is a search for social justice for peasants and peasant communities, mere survival is not enough.

While the testimonies from community members in Polders 22 and 23 attest to the importance of self-determination in food production for agrarian communities, at the same time they speak to the precarious livelihoods of the most marginal members of these communities, and their acute vulnerability to ecological crises. This latter concern in particular suggests that even as rural social movements (and the scholars, activists and policy makers that support them) advocate for food sovereignty in the face of a global industrial food regime, they must also be conscious of the insufficiency of such a framework to attend to the needs of all rural classes facing ecologies in crisis. This concern is increasingly important, as Edelman explains, for the peasantries of the 21st century, "the subsistence crisis has become a permanent state" (Edelman 2005, 336).

The political implications of this analysis are that while attention to food systems and advocacy for food sovereignty are important and can have powerful impacts, these strategies fall short if they are insufficiently attentive to dynamics of land and class. As our case demonstrates, this essentialism does a disservice to rural social movements and the diverse actors of which they are composed. As Wolford has noted of analyses of such social movements, "we tend to recognize the different initial subject positions of these mobilized actors but then romantically imagine that these differences fall away once a movement is formed" (Wolford 2010, 7). Our attentiveness to the diversity within rural communities in Khulna seeks to direct attention to the ways in which the global struggle for food sovereignty could better reflect their diverse needs and aspirations. For the landless community members in both Polder 22 and 23, their lack of land rights has resulted in dispossession, and for those in Polder 22, their ability to take

advantage of rights to food sovereignty has been constrained in the absence of a more comprehensive set of agrarian rights.

This analysis leads us to support Borras and Franco's appeals to "land sovereignty" as an important corollary to food sovereignty. As Borras and Franco explain, "taking seriously the historic demands for land by the various strata of working peoples, what is needed is an alternative frame that better expresses a truly pro-working poor class bias in land issues – especially the core idea of the rural working classes being able to exercise full and effective control over the land where they live and work" (Borras & Franco 2012, 6). The case of Polder 22 and 23 suggests that combining land sovereignty with food sovereignty may be precisely the alternative frame necessary to achieve sustainable and equitable agrarian reform. If we are to embrace McMichael's argument that "the transformation of rural subjectivity [through agrarian social movements] is not confined to defending property or territory, but includes re-envisioning the conditions necessary to develop sustainable and democratic forms of social reproduction," (McMichael 2009b, 308), then a more inclusive framing is clearly necessary.

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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