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Dispossession by 'Development': Corporations, Elites and NGOs in Bangladesh

Abu Ahsan and Katy Gardner

- ¹ Agricultural land in Bangladesh is disappearing fast. World Bank figures show a drop from 77.1% of the country's total land area being given over to agriculture in 1990 to 72.2% in 2000 and 70.12% in 2011. Add to this the wetlands and natural lakes or *haors* (areas which seasonally flood and are treated as commons and used for fishing) which are rapidly being filled for building or privatised for shrimp cultivation and it is clear that there are seismic changes underway. What processes are involved? As in other parts of South Asia, researchers have pointed to a mixture of corrupt governance, hyper development and criminal entrepreneurialism (Geisler & Feldman 2012, Adnan 2013). More generally scholars across South Asia have documented how elites, criminal entrepreneurs, property speculators and corrupt governments work together in land expropriation, often taking Harvey's theory of 'accumulation by dispossession' (2003) as a starting point. (Adnan 2013, Misra 2011, Münster & Münster 2012, Walker 2008, Münster & Strümpell 2014, Levien 2011). Yet whilst this work points to the interplay between the state, local political elites and 'crony capitalism' (Geisler & Feldman 2012) so far there has been less discussion of the role of Western-based multinationals (MNCs). For example, although valuable research shows how Special Economic Zones are associated with rampant property speculation and entrepreneurship, leading to the dispossession of the peasantry by a rentier class (Levien 2011), the sometimes contradictory mechanisms used by multinationals which benefit from the newly released land have attracted less attention (though see Cross 2014).
- ² In the following article, based around two case studies of extractive MNCs in Bangladesh, we show how these formed shifting alliances with NGOs as well as the state and local elites in order to gain a 'social license to operate' (Prono & Slocombe 2012, Kirsch 2014). As this implies, it would be simplistic to understand 'accumulation by dispossession'

solely in terms of a state-corporate nexus, or indeed to portray the 'locals' as sharing the same agenda, or necessarily unwilling to participate in processes of land speculation and industrialisation (*cf.* Cross 2014, Hall 2011). As we shall see, the reality is more complex. In both cases the MNCs worked through local and national political networks, often treading a difficult path through the contradictory interests of the different groups. Both also drew upon powerful discourses of 'development' in order to justify their presence, discourses which resonated with local and national aspirations for modernity. A notable strategy in this context was the contracting out of projects of community development to NGOs, which added ethical respectability to the MNCs and, in the first case, acted as a buffer between the local population and the corporation. Indeed, as has been noted in other parts of the world where extractive industries have followed similar tactics, NGOs are increasingly drawn into the state-corporate nexus, even when violent dispossession is involved (Welker 2009, 2014, Zalik 2005). Welker describes how in Indonesia, for example, the Newmont mining company supported local elites who ran NGOs in the name of CSR and then violently attacked other groups who protested against the mine (Welker 2009, 2014). In this and other cases, researchers have described how discourses of 'corporate social responsibility', 'partnership' and 'development' mask and/or legitimise the extraction of resources by the corporation. Clearly, whilst Harvey is correct to point out the role that the state-corporate nexus plays in land appropriation, we need to go further, considering also the role of local elites, NGOs and other agencies.

- ³ In what follows we attempt to unravel some of the contradictions as well as describe the shifting interests and alliances involved. In the first case, the American corporation Chevron gained access to approximately 60 acres of farming land in order to construct and operate a huge gas plant which was inaugurated in 2007 in Bibiyana, Habiganj. In the second, the multinational company JT accessed soil, land and water for its construction materials production plant in Dumki, Sylhet. Both corporations sidestepped the actual process of land appropriation, either by leaving its forcible acquisition to the government (in Bibiyana) or by turning soil into a commodity (in Dumki). Both also used the promise of development either via projects of improvement and/or by encouraging the anticipation of industrialisation and new economic opportunities as a means to pacify local resistance. To this extent, dispossession is not an unintended consequence of development (*development by dispossession*). Rather, the promise of development emerges, whether intentionally or not, as a means to dispossess (*dispossession by 'development'*). In both cases the corporations gained the support of local elites by offering developmental gifts and contracts for supplying labour and raw materials; these elites in turn helped to repress local conflict and allow the change in land use to take place. Finally, and significantly, both attempted to co-opt national NGOs. The research on which this paper is based was, in the Chevron study, a mixture of participant observation, interviews and detailed case studies of household coping strategies, carried out by Katy Gardner, Zahir Ahmed, Masud Rana and Fatema Bashar and funded by the ESRC-DFID. Interviews took place amongst transnational villages in Bangladesh and the UK, amongst low-income households in the villages concerned and amongst Chevron staff in Dhaka. In the Dumki case, qualitative research was carried out by Abu Ahsan, Raniya Shams and Marup Hossain from BRAC. This entailed interviews with people involved in the project, farmers and landowners, fishermen, local activists, journalists, politicians, businessmen, contractors, JT management and security staff, group discussions with villagers and observation of various sites in Dumki. A few more interviews took place in Dhaka with BRAC and JT staff. Information on JT was also gathered from extensive desk research.

Before turning to our cases in more detail, let us start by briefly outlining the historical background to what Karim has described as 'the shadow state' of NGOs in Bangladesh (Karim 2011: xviii).

The 'Shadow State': A brief history of NGOs in Bangladesh

- 4 Bangladesh complicates the standard concept of clearly demarcated states, civil society and private sectors. Since the country was formed in 1971, the NGO sector has experienced phenomenal growth, evolution and diversification, delivering public goods to such an extent that Rehman Sobhan (1997) has forecast an erosion of state sovereignty. This role developed in the aftermath of the war of independence from Pakistan, a time when much of the country's infrastructure was destroyed, poverty was rampant and Henry Kissinger infamously referred to the country as a 'bottomless basket case' (White 1999: 307). In this early period NGOs were predominantly focussed on rural poverty. Over the 1970s two of the country's leading NGOs, BRAC and the Grameen Bank, had been experimenting with a cooperative approach to rural community development. The assumption of a cohesive village society was, however, fractured. In the late 1970s, a BRAC initiated study, *The Net: Power Structure in Ten Villages*, reported on widespread corruption and exploitation in the programmes (BRAC 1980). Disillusioned by the cooperative model, the Grameen Bank began to work exclusively with poor women through a model of collateral free small credit. Meanwhile other pioneering NGOs, including BRAC and PROSHIKA, used Paolo Freire's theory of 'conscientisation' as a source of inspiration for critical literacy programmes. The language and appeal of activism drew numerous left leaning university graduates to these NGOs. Along with small-scale economic activities, skill training, and collateral free credit, young educated NGO field organisers carried out critical literacy—an iterative educational method to evoke critical reflections and political consciousness among its participants. This led to some early successes in which landless people accessed *khas* (government owned) land or common property, though challenges were to follow from both local elites and the state (Rafi 2003).
- 5 By the mid-1980s, international aid had shifted its focus away from the politics of mobilisation towards market participation as the route to empowerment (Kabeer 2003). NGO leaders also found themselves increasingly integrated into the international aid industry, with its demands for efficiency, cost effectiveness and sustainability (Feldman 2003). This was also the period of World Bank and IMF structural adjustment, in which the country was undergoing reforms aimed at trade liberalisation, denationalisation and privatisation. In 1990 Ershad was removed by a popular student-led democracy movement and the pace of neoliberal reform programmes accelerated. Donors invested heavily in micro credit and emphasised 'partnership' between corporations, government, big NGOs, small NGOs, CBOs, local elites and 'the community' (Lewis 2004). During this period, the amount of international aid coming to NGOs 'ballooned from roughly [US]\$150 million in 1990 to nearly [US]\$450 million in 1995, the peak year of the decade to 2000' (Stiles 2002: 837). Relying on the microfinance infrastructure, some of the pioneering NGOs scaled up massively whilst small-scale NGOs mushroomed, covering almost all of the country's many thousand villages. The private sector was also booming,

with the rapid expansion of the garment sector plus the arrival of MNCs in telecommunication, energy and Banking.

- 6 During the late 2000s, the Grameen Bank focussed on profit, constantly reinventing its financial package, as did BRAC, Asa and others in what was becoming a highly competitive and sophisticated credit market. BRAC also invested heavily in the new private sector, including ventures in commercial banking, clothing, IT, a private university and the food industry. Today BRAC is the biggest provider of employment after the government (Smillie 2009). In the late 2000s it extended its reach to Africa, Asia and Latin America, whilst in 2006 the Nobel peace prize went to Muhammad Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank. Meanwhile, Bangladesh outperformed India and Pakistan in a number of key social indicators including life expectancy, health, infant mortality, education and women's development (Sen 2013). The World Bank reports that Bangladesh had graduated from being a lower income country to a lower-middle income country. By the late 2000s financial viability had become crucial for NGOs, especially in a time when donor funding was shrinking. The private sector and CSR is therefore an increasingly important source of funding for NGOs, as is the new emphasis on 'social enterprise' and 'social business'. It is from this context that 'partnerships' with corporations keen to push their agendas of 'corporate social responsibility' take place. Let us return to our case studies.

Chevron in Bibiyana

- 7 We start with Chevron in Bibiyana, North East Bangladesh, where land appropriation between 2005-and 2007 enabled the company's construction and operation of a large gas field. The land was forcibly acquired by the government and then leased back to the corporation. While distancing the corporation from threatened state violence, Chevron had to negotiate carefully with a variety of state and non-state actors in order to construct and operate the plant, allying themselves with members of the local elite to whom they offered development gifts and contracts and enlisting reputable NGOs to carry out projects of community development. All the while, however, their presence was dependent upon their relationship to the state and, in turn, the land acquisitions that the state enforced. Indeed, the process of land acquisition was expedited when the corporation's representatives negotiated a higher rate of compensation with the government. Their successful navigation through these tricky alliances and ethically contradictory positions has led to the corporation's current position as the largest gas producer and foreign investor in Bangladesh.
- 8 The Bibiyana gas field is situated on paddy land between four populous villages in Habiganj, Greater Sylhet, an area with high levels of transnational migration to the U.K., which has been described elsewhere by Gardner (e.g. 1995, 2008, 2012). When natural gas was discovered in the early 2000s the contract for extracting the gas was granted by the government to the energy company Unocal, or ULB. A smaller gas field had already been built by Occidental in the late 1990s a few kilometres away, but this was to be far larger, using 60 acres of prime agricultural land for the actual gas field, plus much more for the pipeline and high banked roads that would connect the gas fields (or 'pads') to each other and to the main road. Given the intense use of agricultural land in the area, and the value put on it both by absent landlords in the UK and those using it in the *desh* (home), it was immediately apparent that there would be opposition.

- 9 Given the local opposition to the land loss, how was the corporation to manage the contradiction of compliance with global moralities of ethical business practice, yet also gain access to the land? In 2005 the District Commissioner announced that the land would be forcibly acquired by the government, at a rate of approximately one-tenth of the market value (Reyes & Begum 2005: 26). According to accounts gathered during the research, local people were swiftly mobilised by local leaders against the operation, presenting a united front between and within the affected villages. Although much of the land was owned by a relatively small group of elite families who had members living in the UK (known locally as *Londonis*), poorer households either sharecropped or worked on it as agricultural labourers; any net loss of land thus impacted negatively on what were already precarious agricultural livelihoods (Gardner 2012). Crucially, those leading the protests, the *Londoni* landowners, were patrons to land poor and landless households, providing *shahajo* ('help', charity) to many in times of crisis. Political support given to their patrons was necessary to the survival of many of these households (Gardner 1995, see also Wood 2003).
- 10 As the protest movement grew in size there were marches and road blockades, leading to the eventual halting of construction. The police were quick to respond: the gas field was a major project for the BNP government and they were keen that Unocal complete the building by 2007. Here the government faced its own contradiction. Whilst nationally the presence of extractive multinationals was highly controversial, with national uproar over planned open-plan mining by Asia Energy at Phulbari (see Nuremowla 2011 and this volume, Gain 2006), few disputed the need for energy security (*cf.* Islam *et al.* 2008, Wesley 2006). By 2008–11 this had become pressing; power shortages were hampering the industry which had motored Bangladesh's growth rate of 6.6 % (in the first part of 2010). Meanwhile, the leaders of the two main parties, the BNP and the Awami League, shifted their positions according to whether or not they were in power. In an account given by one of the leading lights of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports (a Dhaka based protest group against extractive MNCs), Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the Awami League, was supportive of their movement whilst in opposition to the BNP before 2008, but quickly changed tactics after the Awami League came to power in 2008, acting to suppress anti-MNC protests in Dhaka that year.
- 11 Meanwhile, in Bibiyana in 2005 armed police escorts were provided for company and government officials and violence threatened. In a visit to the area the District Commissioner reminded local people that in similar situations in Bangladesh, troops had been called in and publicly threatened to have the leaders arrested (Reyes & Begum 2005). During the research conducted in 2009–11, informants talked of the beatings and arrests that took place in 2005. In another story the researchers were told how one of the local activists was taken in the night by the Rapid Action Battalion to their base in Habiganj, thus severely compromising Unocal's attempts to build 'community relations'.¹ As this story implies, the relationship between MNCs and national governments can be difficult to negotiate: whilst Unocal had to gain access to the land it was not in their interest for local leaders, with whom they were attempting to build relationships, to be arrested. Whilst needing to avoid the financial and political costs of failing to complete construction on time, the corporation did not wish to be associated with the dirty stuff of everyday governance in Bangladesh, for this could damage both their local and their global reputation. In a report commissioned by consultants tasked to advise Unocal on improving community relations, they are cautioned to:

Ensure that company related vehicles and other infra-structure are not used to commit human rights abuses [...] the company reputation is directly linked to the reputation of the user, or how the vehicles are used. For example, several companies currently face court cases (in criminal court) because 'their' vehicles were used by the police or army to commit human rights abuses [...] (Begum & Reyes 2005: 24).

- 12 Just as MNCs cannot control the governments in the countries where they work, neither are all their employees necessarily working towards the same agenda. Community Relations staff may, for example, have particular aims and objectives or views of 'the community' that are not shared by their colleagues in Security. In another section of the report, a 'senior UBL staff member' is quoted as saying: 'Unocal is really the David here and the people are Goliath. If they stand up and demand something in protest they have all the power' (Reyes & Begum 2005: 8). While from the perspective of local people such a view of power relations verges on the ludicrous, it is worth noting the potential threat that local activism was deemed to pose during this period.
- 13 Although there is no evidence that Unocal condoned the use of violence against the activists, they accepted the use of police escorts for their visits to the area and provided accommodation for a specially assigned police force, a tactic that indicates the prioritising of 'security' over human rights considerations. As the Reyes & Begum report states:

UBL (Unocal) has agreed to provide barracks, located 7 km from the site, and a vehicle for a special police contingent assigned to the area. While such support is not unusual, there is always a risk that, in the event of the use of force, the company will be associated with any abuses. For example, threats of violence have already been applied. In addition, one high ranking official told us there is no space in the land acquisition process for human rights considerations, and UBL admits to 'having no control over the police [...]' (2005: 23, emphasis added).

If state threats of violence were risky for Unocal's reputation, other government tactics had hidden costs for the company. Many of the accounts collected during the research indicate that pressure was put on *union parishad* level BNP (Bangladesh National Party, which was in power during the research) leaders to stop their opposition to the plant by high ranking BNP members. As Reyes & Begum report:

people are aware that pressure was applied by BNP government officials at very high levels to the local BNP leader who organised the community protests. The resulting perception is that UBL is aligned to the ruling party (2005: 6).

- 14 As the protest movement was gathering force, those responsible for community relations in Unocal were keen to present a 'smiling face' to the locals (Shever 2010). Holding meetings in which grievances were aired was one way to do this, as advised by the Reyes & Begum report. Another was the distribution of appeasing gifts, including, in these early days of community relations, T-shirts for children, sweets and building materials offered to poor people whose houses had been damaged in recent floods (Gardner 2012). Crucially, the company also became involved in negotiations with the government to increase the rate of compensation for land, correctly identifying this as the key issue for the leaders of the protest who as landowners had the most to lose financially. When they were successful, persuading the government to offer rates at market value, some of the mainstays of the activism became less confrontational, realising that land loss was inevitable and they should take what was offered. As those leaders withdrew their support for the protest movement, they started to persuade others to stop too.

- 15 The company's success in negotiating the price of land upwards was boosted by their strategy to expedite the compensation process. Recognising that if left to the inefficient and corrupt government land offices, landowners might not receive payment in time or would have to pay large bribes, the company installed mobile land offices in the vicinity and in 2009 reported to us that 95% of all claims had been settled. This is what the company state in their 2007 Corporate Social Responsibility Report:

During the Bibiyana Project's development more than two hundred meetings were held with community members to understand their concerns and explain the project's impacts and benefits. Residents were surveyed to understand their perceptions of the project and relations were built with local leaders, communities and non-government organisations.

Considered a cultural and economic asset in Bangladesh, land was important to the project's development. Chevron took steps to mitigate the impact of land acquisitions and leases by building the pipeline without displacing people from their homes. Also, five temporary offices were located along the pipeline route to help landowners register their deeds, secure payment from the authorities and answer questions about the project.²

As this implies, by 2007 Chevron had taken over from Unocal, the companies having merged in 2005. One effect of this merger is that past mistakes and problems could be blamed on Unocal whilst Chevron appeared to be doing things better, even though the actual personnel on the ground were the same. For example, during the research an official responsible for community relations mentioned that Unocal had made 'a lot of mistakes', which Chevron had now put right. What he didn't mention was that *he* was the person in charge of community relations during Unocal's time: when the merger took place, *he* had stayed in post.

- 16 Having expedited the land compensation process, Chevron set to work offering the surrounding communities a range of development programmes. Whilst accounts of the negotiations over this period differ, with some informants reporting that the company originally pledged to provide much more, the promises of community development were an additional reason why some of the leaders changed tactics and now negotiated with, rather than activated against, the company. In addition to development goods, which they presided over, their relationship with Chevron officials also led to contracts for the supply of labour and building materials. Meanwhile, for Chevron the objective was for the company to present itself as ethical, socially responsible, and 'partners' with the local people whose land had been lost and livelihoods damaged (Gardner 2012, Gardner *et al* 2012). As stated in the 2007 CSR report:

We told them that we were more interested to know about where their strength lay, what their capacities were, before we set out to address their needs. Our goal was always to forge a partnership with the local community to play a part in the overall development of the community.³

Partnership with various well-known NGOs was another component of the community development programs. The Sylheti NGO Friends in Village Development Bangladesh was funded to carry out a programme of 'Alternative Livelihood Programmes', whilst the Smiling Sun Franchise of Health Clinics was responsible for two clinics.⁴ A further programme of stipends and scholarships for school children was also funded by the company. The strategy was about more than simply gaining community compliance, or a 'social license to operate' (Prono & Slocombe 2012). It was also aimed at creating a particular image of Chevron, or rebranding the company for local and national consumption. This was done in part by buying into the good reputation of the NGOs,

whose logos were displayed prominently beside that of Chevron, thus creating an image of an ethical and caring company working for the good of local people. Whilst road signs featuring children or madrasa students wearing Chevron hard hats and reminding drivers to take care to mark out 'Chevron territory' (cf. Yeh 2013, also Ferguson 2005), other signage displayed prominently outside the clinics or sites of other good works (a 'friendship bridge', or FIVDB's offices) are marked with the Chevron logo. Meanwhile, researchers noted how NGO fieldworkers, rather than Chevron employees, tended to be in the frontline of complaints from local people concerning the gas field and Chevron (Gardner *et al.* 2012).

- ¹⁷ Whilst in its public statements the company stressed 'partnership' with NGOs, the degree of equality of this partnership is debateable. For example, in an event funded by the research project held in Dhaka in which the role of CSR in Bangladesh was discussed in 2011, the NGOs funded by Chevron showed PowerPoint slides concerning their good works in the area, whilst those not funded by the company and members of other civil society organisations were highly critical, giving the impression that the event was stage-managed by Chevron. Meanwhile, the leaders who had formed alliances with Chevron met with varying success. While some made money by becoming labour contractors and / or headed the 'Village Development Organisations' that oversaw the provision of development goods, several described how they were unable to match local expectations of the largess they should offer and came under severe criticism from their supplicants, leading to a reduction rather than an increase in status and political power. As one man explained:

Of all the demands we made to Chevron, we achieved about 5%. Our fellow villagers started insulting us because we hadn't achieved their demands. They became very suspicious, saying that we'd been 'bought' by Chevron and were no longer looking out for their interests. I suppose the reason for these suspicions is that I'm working as a contractor for Chevron, so people think I'm their man, not a man of the people. Through my tree planting project I can hire a few women labourers, but not much more, so everyone's dissatisfied with me. Their demands are so high, but I can't recruit 100 people, only 15... (field notes 2009).

As the leaders and NGOs who had formed alliances with Chevron faced a negative backlash from the local population, Chevron were able to sidestep confrontation since they were now working through these intermediaries, their 'partners'. While the road ahead remained strewn with difficulties—the company's policy of bringing labourers from outside was to lead to more protests in 2013/2014 when the gas field expanded—for now at least they had successfully gained a social license to operate.

- ¹⁸ It would be wrong to deduce from this account that NGOs are necessarily willing partners with corporations. Let us turn to our second case study, in which the corporation 'JT' attempted to form a partnership with one of Bangladesh's biggest NGOs, BRAC. Here we see a similar set of corporate techniques which, on the one hand use discourses of the 'value of land' and development and seek alliances with national NGOs and on the other hand assist local elites in their pursuit of resource appropriation. This two pronged strategy took place in Dumki (a pseudonym), a *haor*⁵ region in Sylhet in Northeast Bangladesh, where the JT industry plant is located.

JT in Dumki, Sylhet

- ¹⁹ JT, a European multinational company specialising in building materials production, offered the NGO BRAC to be its CSR partner in the 'Dumki Uplifting Project'. Written by international consultants in engineering vocabulary, a fifty page report laid out a large-scale landscape engineering plan. This involved construction of artificial lakes and embankments in the wetland. It was intended to supply the plant's raw material—clay—but also to set up an aqua-agricultural farming system, which would generate employment and uplift the lives and livelihoods of affected people. This was presented as a scientific solution to land scarcity in Bangladesh, poverty in the *haor* region, and a way of meeting the increasing demand for raw materials on which the country's development rested. JT applied for government approval with this plan and invited BRAC to initiate community mobilisation on the proposed project. Partnership with a reputed NGO was also seen as constructive in getting government approval. In the post-2000 NGO scene in Bangladesh, CSR projects are taken as a potential source of funding, as aid donor funding has been shrinking along with the rise of the private sector.⁶ In-mid 2013, BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division (RED) carried out field research in Dumki to investigate community perceptions of the proposed project. Soon after their arrival in the field, the researchers learned that the project was primarily to do with land appropriation. The following account is based on this research. We use pseudonyms to conceal the identity of the corporation in question, the name of the proposed project and the project area to maintain anonymity and confidentiality as part of the agreement with BRAC.
- ²⁰ We start with an analysis of the project report.⁷ Comparing this with our field data, we realised how the report left out crucial information to portray the project area in a way that would fit into their plans for resource extraction in the area. As James Ferguson has demonstrated in Lesotho, the project narratives were produced to provide a charter for intervention, becoming the perfect 'anti politics machine' (Ferguson 1990). The second part of the case study shows the expectations of connection and experiences of disconnection that characterise the local population's relationship with JT (*cf.* Gardner 2012). Then, we discuss how JT, in spite of failing to secure government clearance and partnership with BRAC, was able to access raw materials by offering contracts to local elites (*cf.* Geenen & Honke 2012, Welker 2009). What is interesting in these myriad processes is the centrality of development—as a discourse, or bribe—through which multinational corporations attempt to forge alliances with states, NGOs and local elites and extract mineral resources.
- ²¹ The 'Dumki Uplifting Project' arose from JT's decision to switch to clay from shale as a raw material for manufacturing. For the first few years the industry relied on imported shale, but as this became gradually more expensive and difficult to access the company saw a cheaper solution in clay, which they thought they could excavate from the perceived backwater of Dumki. Before laying out the landscape engineering plan, the report discussed the problems of the project area. Dumki, an area of nearly three hundred hectares, was presented as 'less productive, isolated and impoverished'. (JT 2011: 5) This was due, the report claimed, to the very characteristics of *haor* agro-ecological systems—'early flash floods', 'a prolonged monsoon limiting livelihood opportunity in only wild-catch fishing (is possible)'; 'mostly uncultivable land', 'poor yield one crop production', and 'low input based agricultural practices' (JT 2011: 5–8). Therefore, the farmers and

- owners in Dumki were not getting 'expected benefits from the land', the report claimed (JT 2011: 9, emphasis added).
- 22 Large-scale infrastructure projects such as building embankments are not new in Bangladesh. Indeed, as a number of studies point out, this approach to flood control remains the single most important factor for large-scale displacement of people in the country (Zaman 1996). It is interesting to note that although 'extracting' clay was its main focus, 'uplifting' remained the most used term in the project report outlining its 'Sustainable Mining' (JT 2011: 8). The use of such oxymorons, as the anthropology of extractive industries identifies, is one of the main strategies of corporate elites, used to conceal the harm caused by mining to people and the environment, to manage and neutralise critique (Kirsch 2010: 2014).
- 23 During their field visit researchers found the land at Dumki to be much more productive and meaningful to the villagers than implied in the project report. Although the whole project area was represented as 'low-lying and flood prone' (JT 2011: 8), a large chunk of land was found to be elevated, as a result of sedimentation. The majority of villagers identified themselves with agricultural livelihoods. Although a large segment of land in Dumki yields only one crop a year, a significant portion yields two and some three. In addition, the silt deposited by annual floods constantly increases the *haor*'s soil fertility level, leading to higher crop yields. The return from *boro* rice is much higher in *haor* areas than the national average, and can be achieved without the use of fertilisers (Alam & Islam 2010).
- 24 Crucially, the report ignored local patterns of landownership and neglected to detail the various ways in which land and water were held commonly, providing a vital resource for poorer people. Landownership in Dumki is dominated by a few hundred medium and small owners spanning at least seven villages. A section of Dumki comprised of government owned (*Khas*) land and *Jolmohal*. The literal meaning of *Jolmohal* is water (*jol*) area (*mohal*). This can be a section of river, floodplains, land depressions or an individual pond owned by the government. It is the policy of the Bangladesh government to distribute *Khas*-land and *Jolmohal* to marginalised populations with the objective of redressing social disparities (Barkat *et al.* 2000). The *Jolmohal* in Dumki was leased out to the local mosque committee through which local landless and sharecroppers were engaged in fisheries. In the dry season, the vast swath of *Khas*-land is used by farmers for grazing their animals. This turns into wetland in monsoon, a common resource for villagers, a crucial aspect of *haor* lives and livelihoods.
- 25 As the BRAC researchers showed glossy visuals of the 'Dumki Uplifting Project' to a group of villagers, they were met with anger: 'We will not sell our land to JT', they were told. 'We will not let the government lease its *Khas*-land for this project'; 'It's not a development project, but a trick to steal our land' (fieldwork, May 9, 2013). Yet understanding the history of the JT industry plant through the perspectives of Dumki's inhabitants allows us to see how large-scale infrastructure projects are built upon, as Cross puts it, an 'economy of anticipation' (Cross 2014).
- 26 In the wake of the new millennium, the news of JT's investment excited the nation. It was one of the largest foreign investments in the industrial sector, which matched with the country's booming real estate market. The construction of JT's gigantic plant and an impressive cross border convenor, which supplied its essential raw ingredients from India, was a testament to the industrial and developmental ambitions of Bangladesh.

Villagers in Dumki shared these dreams. They expected formal employment, electricity and gas connections, bridges, roads, high schools, colleges, hospitals.

- 27 JT bought the land to build its plant from a few wealthy villagers. Many villagers worked as labourers in the construction phase. A community centre was built, in between the plant and Dumki, to run development activities such as primary education, basic healthcare and vocational training. These 'gifts' from JT were welcome, but after the construction only a handful of locals were given permanent employment in the plant. As in Bibiyana, villagers claimed that the company had a deliberate policy to not recruit locals (see also Cross 2009, Gardner 2012, Gardner *et al.* 2012). Locals demanded that the company hire their people. Seeing no response, they protested against the company's recruitment policy, but learned that their complaints were not being heard beyond the hired contractors, field organisers and security guards. The real decision-makers remained outside of their reach, inaccessible and unapproachable. Meanwhile those living close to the plant suffered physically from environmental hazards caused by factory smoke and dust. Researchers were shown trees in their homesteads which could no longer bear fruit due to air pollution. These families remained uncompensated. A few years ago, JT decided to block the muddy road surrounding its plant through which villagers accessed the river port. The company had to retreat from this decision in the face of protest. Meanwhile, JT wanted to lease Khas-land and *Jolmohal* from the government to extract the clay. This was also met with local resistance. In an interview a farmer remarked with irony, 'once we were told that JT's investment would make our area as developed as Singapore!' (fieldwork, May 15, 2013). In spite of expectations of social mobility and modernity, the majority of villagers stayed behind, 'physically, culturally and economically disconnected' from their hoped source of capital (Gardner 2012: 44).
- 28 In the face of ongoing opposition JT followed a similar strategy to Chevron, offering contracts to local elites, who then effectively co-opted the resistance. Some of the most influential political elites in the Upazila and district levels were offered contracts; the contractors then convinced individuals to sell soil from their land, which they then sold to JT at disproportionately higher prices. It's important to note that these contractors are buying soil not land, thus avoiding the problem of land acquisition. The practice of soil extraction has brought about adverse socio-economic, environmental and political effects. The BRAC researchers were taken to several excavated plots. These not only become unusable after a few years but risk causing the erosion of adjacent land, which, village activists told us, may force the owners to sell them cheap to the contractors. Frustration is rising amongst those trying to preserve their land as their attempts to appeal to higher authorities such as the Environmental Ministry are failing. The village activists, who once displayed tremendous unity against JT, feel incapable of stopping individual community members from selling their soil. Tensions emerge from within, diminishing the strength of collective decision-making capacity and united resistance as individuals sell their land and move away. JT's tactic of outsourcing clay supply is fracturing the political as well as physical landscape of Dumki as clay piles up in its compound.
- 29 Ahmed, Union Parishad Chairman, is such a contractor. He is a strong man of the ruling party. When researchers met him in his office, he was telling his followers how to confront opposition. In 2013 Bangladesh saw a peak of political turmoil as the national election was approaching. In interview, Ahmed accepted the fact that soil extraction was

damaging Dumki, but he said his role was only nominal. He instead pointed to the bigger players and blamed JT for failing to maintain good relations with the locals.

- 30 During the democratic era in Bangladesh, party politics has become an increasingly important means for gaining access to key resources, services and goods. The overlap between political party activity and *mastaan* (musclemen) activity dominates the struggle for valued resources. Whilst in Bibiyana the elites were persuaded to stop their opposition to the gas field via political pressure from the government, an increased rate of land compensation, and the opportunity of running development programmes and becoming contractors for the corporation, in Dumki JT authorised soil subcontractors were political entrepreneurs coming from both ruling and opposition political parties. This explains why Dumki's protest never received support from political organisations, despite many promises. In a country which is dominated by a bipolar polity (Sobhan 2004), cultivating relations with both the opposition and ruling party is a standard way of doing business. This strategy is particularly popular among real estate companies for large-scale land appropriation. As Devine notes, 'informal and sometimes shadowy procedures and relationships have become the primary management mode of the state. These informal relations are what really make things happen in Bangladesh' (Devine 2007: 25). Thus we come across a situation where though the 'Dumki Uplifting Project' had to be halted in the face of local resistance, the company's outsourcing strategy of hiring contractors from the local elite meant that organised protest gradually lost its potency and direction. After reviewing the research BRAC declined the invitation to work with JT on the project, forcing the corporation to rely on informal and shadowy procedures as they failed to establish a formal partnership with state and NGO actors.

Conclusion: Dispossession by 'Development'

- 31 Drawing upon evidence from South and South East Asia, Derek Hall has argued that Harvey's theorisation of 'accumulation by dispossession' is somewhat simplistic in its portrayal of a nexus of state-corporate interests that dispossess resistant rural peasants (Hall 2011, 2013). Rather, landowners may be keen to speculate on their land and people surrounding sites of industrial development or resource extraction may welcome the 'development' that the coming of the corporation heralds (Cross 2014). Indeed, nowadays extractive MNCs routinely deploy promises not only of 'uplift' or new job opportunities but also development gifts as part of their strategies of 'community engagement' (Welker 2012, Rogers 2012, Shever 2010, Rajak 2011). This involves forming alliances with a range of actors, including local elites and NGOs, leading the corporations to negotiate difficult and contradictory relationships, especially when working alongside repressive or corrupt states. Rather than the state simply clearing the way for MNCs to operate, the negotiations and tactics involved can be highly complex and are not guaranteed to meet with success.

- 32 In order to illustrate these processes in this article we have briefly described the strategies employed by two extractive MNCs in their operations in Bangladesh. In both cases the MNCs attempted to make alliances with the state, NGOs, and local elites, offering potentially lucrative contracts to the latter in order to bring individuals who had initially led opposition movements 'on the side'. Whilst the relationship of both MNCs to the state was central, this had to be carefully managed, especially in Bibiyana when forcible acquisition and threatened violence compromised the corporation's 'ethical

business stance'. Significantly both MNCs turned to national NGOs to carry out their community development programmes, leading in the case of Bibiyana to a new and potentially compromising role for those NGOs involved: as providers of programmes working to a corporate agenda.

- 33 In deploying these tactics, the MNCs present their work as ethically irreproachable; according to them, rather than presiding over dispossession they are responsibly contributing to development, empowerment and 'uplift'. In these instances the term *development dispossession* refers not so much to the side effect of people losing land and livelihoods as part of wider processes of development or urbanisation, but to the use of discourses of development, in particular the tropes of 'uplift', 'empowerment' and 'CSR', to enable dispossession to take place. Tellingly, these discourses are not simply impositions consciously created to fool people. Instead they chime with widely held dreams of development and connection, shared by those producing the programmes as well as those to whom they are offered. In Dumki, the people living on the outskirts of the JT plant saw epochal changes in the local *haor* region, with their dreams and desired futures turning to disconnections, losses and ruptures. Meanwhile, in Bibiyana, alliances with the state and national NGOs helped pave the way for Chevron's operations. In both cases nationally respected NGOs were approached to carry out the good works, under the banner of 'partnership'.
 - 34 Clearly, we have much to learn about the role of corporate capital in rural South Asia. In particular, major questions are raised concerning NGOs tasked with supporting the poor and creating community 'development' whilst accepting funding and contracts from extractive MNCs. Whilst espousing 'development' these also aim, by definition, to profit from the extraction of resources, often leading to environmental damage. By offering contracts and patronage to local elites, they may also be exacerbating inequality. Whilst unable to offer more than sketches in this brief article, we hope that the cases presented here will stimulate more research.
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NOTES

1. The relationship between governments and oil / mining companies is highly complex and varies according to context. In Nigeria, for example, WikiLeaks have revealed documents that show that Shell inserted staff into all of the major ministries (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/dec/08/wikileaks-cables-shell-nigeria-spying>) accessed 5/4/11.
2. Chevron, 2007, URL: file:///C:/Users/GARDNERK/Documents/bibiana/Chevron_CR_Report_2007.pdf
3. Chevron: Bibiana Gas Field, First Anniversary Report: 2008: 11.
4. <http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/smiling-sun-franchise-program-ssfp> (accessed 26/05/14).
5. The *haors* are large saucer-shaped flood plain depressions located mostly in Northeast Bangladesh covering about 25% of the entire region. This inland freshwater wetland ecosystem is enriched with aquatic biodiversity but can be prone to annual flash flood from rivers and high rainfall compared to other parts of the country. Silt, deposited by annual floods, however, keeps *haor* soil fertility high, leading to higher crop yields during the dry season.
6. Source: personal communication with Andrew Jenkins, BRAC's Donor Liaison Officer.
7. 'Dumki Uplifting Project' (pseudonym) report was forwarded to BRAC in 2011. The date of publication, however, was not mentioned in the report. Several original quotes from the report have been used in the following paragraphs. Some words/terms from the quotes are emphasised in italic by the author.

ABSTRACTS

In this article, which is based around two case studies of extractive multinationals in Bangladesh we show how the multinationals concerned worked with states, local elites and national NGOs in order to gain access to land and resources. In negotiating these complex relationships the multinationals often found themselves in potentially contradictory positions, requiring the muscle of the state where land had to be forcibly acquired but also the partnership of national NGOs in order to carry out development programmes as part of their policies of 'community engagement' or 'uplift'. As this implies, whilst the state-corporate nexus is central to land appropriation in South Asia, we must also consider the role of NGOs and other development agencies, especially in a context such as Bangladesh where NGOs have taken on the role of 'shadow state' (Karim, 2011: xviii) . Indeed, the growing links between NGOs, private finance and corporate interests requires urgent attention.

INDEX

Keywords: multinationals, Bangladesh, land, NGO

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