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A man carries a bucket of shrimp in Khulna, Bangladesh. Photo by Felix Clay/WorldFish

Brackish Waters and Salted Lands: The social cost of shrimp in Bangladesh

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What is the real cost of the shrimp we consume? What kinds of social and environmental relations are concealed in those bags brimming with frozen prawns available in supermarkets throughout the Global North?

Such questions are timely and pressing. Today, aquaculture is the world's "fastest growing food production system," accounting for about half of all seafood consumed worldwide.¹ Shrimp remains a major growth sector of the so-called "blue revolution": the massive expansion of aquaculture development, particularly in coastal countries of the Global South.² Unlike the "green revolution"—which promised increased agricultural productivity using new seed varieties and chemical inputs—the blue revolution is focused on developing export markets for farm-raised fish from places like Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Honduras to supermarkets in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

This expansion of shrimp aquaculture—fueling and fueled by booming markets for cheap seafood in the North³—has long been recognized as an ecological disaster for producer countries. The massive adoption of shrimp aquaculture has laid waste to ecologically sensitive zones—contributing to the destruction of coastal mangrove forests; the loss of local biodiversity; and rampant pollution

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Shrimp seller in Khulna, Bangladesh. Photo by Mike Lusmore//WorldFish

through the discharge of shrimp pond effluents into local ecosystems. Moreover, concerns about the risks associated with the massive use of antibiotics and chemicals in shrimp farming have raised concerns about the health impacts of consuming imported shrimp. Indeed, such concerns have led to a veritable explosion in certification regimes seeking to regulate production and mitigate the health and environmental impacts of shrimp aquaculture.

Yet, until recently, Western media have given less attention to the *social* costs of shrimp production.⁴ In June 2014, an exposé in *The Guardian* drew attention to human trafficking and the use of slave labor in the Thai shrimp industry and exposed the complicity of major retailers in the US and Europe—including Walmart, Costco, and Tesco—with human rights abuses in the shrimp sector.⁵ The public outcry associated with *The Guardian's* report prompted widespread calls in the US and Europe to boycott imported shrimp until rights for shrimp workers could be convincingly addressed. Such steps are crucial. However, reports of slave labor in shrimp production should not to divert our

attention away from other equally pressing social issues associated with the global shrimp market.

Dispossession is deeply embedded in the practices of shrimp aquaculture. Indeed, the centrality of land grabbing, displacement, and destruction of livelihoods to shrimp aquaculture raises doubts about whether labor laws alone can redress the iniquities of aquaculture. As retailers scramble to save face by enacting new codes of conduct and disavowing responsibility for labor practices in the more distant reaches of their supply chain, a deeper examination of the impacts of shrimp is necessary.

To that end, this backgrounder explores the social costs of shrimp in a community in Khulna, a state in Bangladesh's southwestern coastal region. This region, composed of a network of embanked islands and waterways, is the epicenter of Bangladesh's shrimp production zone. Shrimp is Bangladesh's second largest export industry after garments. Since the Bangladesh government began developing the aquaculture export market in the 1980s—under direction from IMF- and World Bank-imposed

structural adjustment policies—this region has been inundated with shrimp. In what follows, we provide an intimate picture of the impacts of this expansion by exploring Polder 23—an embanked island in which life and livelihoods have been completely—and likely irrevocably—transformed by the arrival of export-oriented shrimp aquaculture. This portrait draws on community-based research conducted with and by residents of Polder 23. It thus offers a first-hand look at the social costs of shrimp.

The Production of Hunger: Life in a shrimp community

Prior to the introduction of shrimp, Khulna's agricultural landscape was dominated by rice. Much of the land in Khulna is composed of islands separated by the vast riverine network of the Ganges basin. In these polders, as these islands are now known, the vast majority of residents are either small farmers or landless laborers, with larger landlords living primarily off-site. Despite small or negligible landholdings, peasants in Khulna have survived through sharecropping; by eking out a living from the highly productive alluvial soil; and through access to common land. Of these, the latter is particularly important. Throughout Bangladesh, there is a tremendous amount of government-owned common (*kbas*) land, which, by constitutional mandate, is available to landless groups. That said, land tenure in Khulna is precarious. This is true in part because, due to the deltaic geology of the region, large tracts of land along the rivers are constantly eroding while new land is continuously being formed from alluvial sediment deposits. The expansion of shrimp production makes this process increasingly worse.

In the 1980s, as government subsidies encouraged adoption of shrimp, absentee landlords realized that embankments—built to keep saltwater out of agricultural land—could also be used to keep saltwater in. Employing armed thugs, these newly minted aquaculture entrepreneurs pushed smallholders off their land and, gaining control of sluice gates, often flooded entire polders with salt water. In many cases, this transition was fraught with violence. For example, on November 7, 1990, shrimpers killed a local landless activist, Karanumayee Sardar, in Polder 22 (adjacent to Polder 23), while she led a protest to stop shrimp land grabs on her island. Her death is still memorialized by those resisting shrimp throughout Asia.

The changes associated with shrimp are starkly and paradigmatically apparent in Polder 23, where the advent of shrimp aquaculture has led to land degradation; the erosion of household self-sufficiency; and displacement. Indeed, in contrast to the vibrant and intensive land use characteristic of rural Bangladesh, the interior of this polder resembles a wasteland. Through the expansion of shrimp ponds, the once verdant landscape of the polder has been transformed into vast tracts of stagnant, brackish water. The remaining settlements are crowded onto thin strips of land, hemmed in by shrimp ponds that often extend to only a few feet from homes. While some households have small garden plots, their plants are stunted and unproductive from the high levels of soil salinity. Residents report that little grows. As one resident described it: “Everyone is in crisis now.... After [shrimp farming] started, I saw with my own eyes that all the trees became dry because of salt in the land, and all the fruit

trees died.... It is really hard for us to survive. People constantly make decisions between food and other necessities, and most of the time, the decision about food wins.”

The expansion of shrimp has led to dramatic insecurity and vulnerability for residents of the polder. While rice cultivation traditionally provided employment for the majority of community members, shrimp farming is far less labor intensive, rendering masses of sharecroppers and agricultural day laborers superfluous to the agrarian economy. Farmers and social movements estimate that the labor requirements for shrimp farming are somewhere between one tenth and one hundredth those of rice farming. What remains are fewer jobs with lower pay and dramatically increased health risks, including standing in chemically-saturated water for hours on end.

Compounding this loss of livelihood is the degradation of productive land. In Polder 23, shrimp farmers have either grabbed or hopelessly salinated most of the *khas* land upon which landless families once relied. For most peasants, the expansion of shrimp aquaculture has decimated household self-sufficiency, forcing them to depend on the market to meet all of their daily needs. Residents now regularly travel to the regional market town to purchase household necessities like food, fuel, and water—once harvested within their own village. As one resident described 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.... We were healthy and had energy then, but now we do not have that.”

As a result of these shifts in

production, many (and in some villages most) landless people have been forced to leave their homes and communities, generally to urban areas to seek out employment in garment factories, rickshaw-pulling, and construction, among other low-paid jobs. Indeed, in Khulna city, there are large slums populated entirely by families displaced from their traditional villages by shrimp. One landless farmer from a neighboring polder resisting the transition to shrimp explained, “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?”⁶

From Food Safety to Food Sovereignty

While the ecological implications of shrimp farming have long been clear, its *social* implications have been less legible to Northern consumers. The US recently implemented a series of restrictions on Bangladeshi shrimp imports, slowing the export of Bangladeshi shrimp to the US to a trickle. These restrictions reflect the US’s concern with the production standards of Bangladeshi shrimp, citing unsanitary conditions and the use of harmful chemicals across the exceedingly opaque supply chain. These claims should no doubt be of concern. However, they don’t reflect the land grabbing; social and physical dislocation; and vulnerability inherent to the industry in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Similarly, production certification schemes—such as the one approved in March by the Aquaculture Stewardship Council⁷—which address production and food safety

while disregarding dynamics of displacement and vulnerability, are equally insufficient.

The implications of shrimp in Polder 23 are open to a range of interpretations. The polder and larger region are in the throes of an agricultural transition. In this transition, development institutions such as the World Bank rationalize the displacement of peasants to urban areas as a necessary and inevitable step for transitioning developing economies to “middle income status.”⁸ Shrimp has certainly been an effective mechanism for depopulating rural landscapes in coastal Bangladesh. Yet, to see these transitions as inevitable is to erase crucial questions of social justice and rights.

4 In Polder 23, shrimp farmers have carried out this transition against the will of the people who have farmed the land for generations. Landless workers have become a precarious labor force through the process of forging a market for luxury food imports in the Global North. The case study outlined here poses important questions for consumers of shrimp not just from Bangladesh, but also from other countries where aquaculture growth has caused displacement and land degradation over the past 30 years. From a consumer standpoint, it is crucial to begin interrogating the sources of shrimp. These questions should certainly address the ecological impacts of the shrimp industry but must also go further. Aquaculture, as Polder 23 dramatically illustrates, exists in a broader social context of land grabbing and displacement.



In Polder 23, shrimp ponds extend to within feet of houses.

NOTES:

1. FAO, *State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2014*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, p. 106.
2. The Global Aquaculture Alliance, a trade group, estimates that global farmed shrimp production will double in the next decade: James Wright, “GOAL 2014: Global shrimp production to double in next decade,” SeafoodSource.com, 8 October 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/ny7bte5>, accessed 14 October 2014.
3. According to Islam, shrimp is the single most consumed form of seafood in the US, at 4.2 pounds per capita. See M.S. Islam, *Confronting the Blue Revolution*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.
4. Though these have long been central concerns for activists, communities, and NGOs in shrimp producing countries. See S. Stonich and I. De La Torre, “Farming Shrimp, Harvesting Hunger,” *Food First Backgrounder* 8(1), 2002.
5. *The Guardian*. “Revealed: Asian Slave Labour Producing Prawns for Supermarkets in US, UK.” 10 June 2014, accessed 14 October 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/q8yr7wd>.
6. We address shrimp in Khulna in more detail in K. Paprocki and J. Cons, “Life in a Shrimp Zone,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2014.
7. “Shrimp standard handed over to the ASC,” Aquaculture Stewardship Council, 27 March 2014, accessed 14 October 2014. <http://tinyurl.com/ktobj3g>
8. See Muzzini and Aparicio, *Bangladesh: The Path to Middle-Income Status from an Urban Perspective*. The World Bank, 2013.