

Who's listening?

Tea workers say no to Economic Zones, demand economic development for the people and right to land for agriculture

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In December 2015, tea workers from Chandpur and Begum Khan Tea Estates in Habiganj protested the threatened seizure of land they were cultivating to supplement their meagre wages by the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA). Their movement organised by the Chandpur Bhumi Rakkhya Committee (Chandpur Land Protection Committee) comprised of tea workers, community activists and members of the tea worker union. BEZA is a centralised government agency whose stated purpose is to establish economic zones in all potential areas in Bangladesh including "backward and underdeveloped" regions with a view to encouraging rapid economic development. Prime

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elites, BEZA, and diasporic Bangladeshis see economic zones as benefitting the economy of Bangladesh. Local political elites were cautious in their support because they knew that full support may mean the loss of votes. Tea workers see the continued cultivation of the land for agricultural use as the preferred course because it benefits the workers in the area and protects the environment. The tea plantation—Duncan Brothers—was a silent objector because the economic zones meant the loss of land that they leased from the government. They, however, were reluctant to take a public stand against the economic zone. So, the movement revealed a diverse set of stakeholders, some in tension, and with differing visions of what economic development means and interpretations on the workers' rights to the land.

Minister Sheikh Hasina is the chair of the governing board which sets the policy decisions for the agency.

In early July of 2019, I spent several days interviewing tea workers who were involved in the movement, local officials from the land office, officials from the Tea Board and representatives from BEZA. From these conversations, it was clear that while tea workers do not oppose development generally, they oppose the conversion of this agricultural land to an economic zone which their forebears have cultivated from the time of British colonialism. This land is important for their survival. The food grown is used for household use to improve their families' nutritional intake and is also sold in the market to supplement their paltry dollar-a-day wages. Without this food and additional income, it is extremely difficult for workers to make a livelihood. Transforming a fertile food growing area into an industrial plot is contrary to ensuring food and nutritional security of the local community.

In contrast, local government land officials and BEZA see this land as a mode for industrial development. It was the local political elites and land officials that made the request to BEZA to consider the land for a special economic zone for industrial development. The industrial vision for economic zones ignores the potential role of farming and food production, contributing and constituting the foundation of balanced national development. Such an idea was also promoted by diasporic Bangladeshis in the UK who see industrialisation, not agriculture, as Bangladesh's path forward. The need for a balanced development policy is still a far cry in the current official governmental policy of development.

What was clear from these stakeholders is that they share drastically different ideas of what economic development means and whom it should benefit. Local

Workers and organisers including Shurjo Kumar argue that they have a right to the land because their forebears have cleared the land for tea cultivation and now cultivate the land for agriculture. Tea worker and leader, Ruma Urang, shares that even though her father was a freedom fighter, her family was never given the proper respect. The land, for her, holds a special significance of finally feeling part of Bangladesh. Protestors draped in Bangladeshi flags and slogans like, "my land, my mother, I will not let you take it away from me," showed the deep emotional and nationalist sentiments around the land. The iconic picture of Sukuhara Karmokar portrays this well.

Adverse possession principles may support the workers' claim to the land, which allows a person to acquire legal rights based on continuous possession of the land. Legally, the government owns the land. It leased it to Duncan Brothers, the tea plantation, and so an argument that the possession was without the permission of the owner would be difficult to establish. At most, as demonstrated in the slum dwellers case brought by BLAST, the government of Bangladesh must provide rehabilitation in the event of any eviction from government land, but this is not what the tea workers are demanding here. Moreover, under Bangladeshi land laws, the government is given wide discretion to use the land in the name of 'public interest'. This is a legally undefined term in the existing laws and essentially refers to the executive order of development principle and therefore requires contestation and legal clarification. Any interpretation must take into account the views of the general population of Bangladesh through a participatory decision-making process.



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