

THE FOOD RIOTS THAT NEVER WERE: THE MORAL AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD SECURITY IN BANGLADESH

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**FOOD RIOTS
&
FOOD RIGHTS**





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Caption: *Protesting garment workers clash with police in Dhaka (Photo: Andrew Biraj)*

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ABOUT THIS WORKING PAPER SERIES

The green revolution and the global integration of food markets were supposed to relegate scarcity to the annals of history. So why did thousands of people in dozens of countries take to the streets when world food prices spiked in 2008 and 2011? Are food riots the surest route to securing the right to food in the twenty-first century? We know that historically, food riots marked moments of crisis in the adjustment to more market-oriented or capitalist food and economic systems. Food riots featured as part of a politics of provisions that helped hold public authorities to account for protecting people during price spikes or shortages.

This research project interrogated this contemporary moment of historical rupture in the global food system through comparative analysis of Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique in the period 2007–12. This was a period of intensely volatile food prices as well as unusual levels of food-related popular mobilisation – unruly political events like riots but also more organised action like the Right to Food movement in India. During the global food crisis of 2007–8 alone, food riots (or subsistence protests) were reported in 30 countries. In many, including the four in our study, the food crisis triggered changes in domestic food security arrangements.

Working with multiple methods and at different levels with media content, with activists and protesters, and with policy and political elites, this research asked: What motivated people to mobilise around food? And did popular mobilisation effect or influence such changes?

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SUMMARY

In 2008, the international media listed Bangladesh among the low-income countries that saw food riots during the global food price crisis. The most notable of these events took place in the pre-monsoon Dhaka heat on 13 April, when workers in the vital export-oriented garments sector took to the streets in a graphic flash of anger at low pay in a time of high staple food prices. Around that time, the government of Bangladesh set in motion efforts to stabilise food prices, to protect those hit hardest by the spike. These efforts were not simple matters: the crisis was global, not easily managed by a single country government. Meanwhile India, the main source of Bangladesh's rice imports, closed its borders to protect its own citizens. Yet the Bangladesh authorities ultimately succeeded, and their policy choices and the institutional architecture that made them possible affirmed Bangladesh's reputation for an effective and responsive food (if not nutrition) security policy.

This research set out to find out whether these events were causally related: did these 'food riots' trigger or activate these responsive and effective food security policies in any sense? The Bangladesh case study (the present paper) is part of a comparative four country study (including India, Kenya and Mozambique) which aimed to test the proposition that popular mobilisation – riots or more organised civil society action – engendered public accountability for hunger during the period of global food price volatility in 2007–12. The proposition was motivated by a reading of the lessons of European history for the present period of globalised financial and commodity price volatility. These lessons suggest that during subsistence crises, food riots were an effective strategy for the relatively powerless masses to hold public authorities to account, and that they were most common in moments of transition towards more market-oriented food regimes. For contemporary Bangladesh, we hypothesised that there were both strong moral economy and powerful political economy reasons to believe that food riots may have played such a triggering role. Garments workers had the means and motive to organise. Policymakers and politicians had the incentives and the institutions with which to respond.

To tackle these issues, the research used a multi-sited research methodology that integrated: a) catalogues of the numbers and types of protests that occurred, using media content analysis; b) close-grained case studies of the motivations and organisation of protest groups using primary qualitative research; and c) semi-structured interviews with key policymakers, activists and informed scholars, designed to reconstruct the policy thinking of the time.

The results of the research failed to validate the proposition that riots engendered accountability for hunger: we found no strong evidence that any of the protests, even the most visceral and important, the garments workers' protests, had directly influenced the policy response. But this was not because popular protest had no power in this context. Instead, it reflected the fact that protest was, in the main, unnecessary. The garments workers' protests highlighted the plight of low-paid urban workers during the food crisis,

but the official machinery was already working to address the situation in its usual mode. If anything, the research findings suggest the causality went in the opposite direction: that the existence (over a longer time period) of relatively effective policies and an institutional architecture for response, and an associated expectation of public action during subsistence crises meant it made sense for garments workers (and a small number of other groups) to protest at this time: their basic survival was threatened, they were able to organise, and they had reasonable expectations that their actions would elicit a response.

Looked at closely, both the ‘food riots’ and the policy response turned out to be more ambiguous and contingent than their headlines suggest. What the long lenses of the global media framed as ‘food riots’ looked different up close and through the filter of domestic politics – arguably these were not food riots in any common sense of the term. As for the policy response, while over the medium term this was sound enough, for those facing hunger it was too late and perhaps also too little. That the government of the moment was an unelected military-backed caretaker regime lent the perception that the lagged response reflected the absence of powerful electoral pressures for action. Tellingly, the popular assessment of the situation was that a democratically elected (‘political government’ in the local term) would have responded faster and better. (It is not clear that this is in fact the case, as the supra-national nature of the crisis was a complexity and a constraint.)

The garments workers’ protests may not have been the cause of the policies that tackled the food price spike, but our analysis suggests that these events were correlated, both rooted in the moral and political economy of subsistence crises in Bangladesh. Our analysis of the 2007–12 period is a mere snapshot of a more dynamic historical cycle of interaction between popular mobilisation and policy responses. During this period, ‘food riots’ did not trigger the policy response but over the longer term, the causality seems to run in the other direction: garments workers protested because they were excluded from the protections enjoyed by other Bangladeshis, and because they had good reason to believe that responsive and effective policies could also be established for them. Their struggle – framed as wages and workers’ rights, not food rights – is ongoing.

We conclude that ‘food riots’ or indeed subsistence protests, did not occur on any significant scale in Bangladesh because they were generally unnecessary: there is a functioning ‘politics of provisions’ here that ensures that ruling elites cannot ignore mass subsistence crises like 2008 without incurring a disempowering loss of legitimacy. For politico-historical, electoral and possibly ecological reasons, the compact between the Bangladeshi masses and their ruling elites centres on the protection of subsistence during shocks. The 1974 famine casts a particularly long shadow over food policy in Bangladesh, serving as a reminder of the fragility both of subsistence and of political legitimacy in this context. The ‘politics of provisions’ in Bangladesh work to keep basic food (not nutrition) security at the top of the political and policy agenda. Few Bangladeshis need to risk actual food riots because most of those exposed to such shocks receive the protection they need, more or less when they need it. By the time a riot occurs, it is already too late: the threat of the loss of legitimacy is powerful enough to drive a reasonable policy and political response.

Keywords: Bangladesh, 1974 famine, food crisis, food price spike 2008, food riots, food security, garments workers, moral economy, readymade garments industry, political economy

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ACRONYMS

BDT	Bangladesh taka
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association
CPB	Communist Party of Bangladesh
CTG	Caretaker Government
EPZ	Export processing zone
FGD	Focus group discussion
FPV	Food price volatility
IGS	Institute of Governance Studies at BRAC University (now merged with BRAC Development Institute and renamed BRAC Institute of Governance and Development)
KBSS	<i>Khudro Babshayi Shartho Shongrokhon Shomity</i> /Committee for the Protection of the Interests of Small Businesspeople
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RMG	Readymade Garments
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

1. INTRODUCTION

Thousands of garment workers in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka went on strike today, closing factories in protest at spiralling food prices.

Demonstrators clashed with police after smashing cars and shops. Local agencies said the army had to be brought in to bring the situation under control, and had police opened fire to scatter the striking workers. Nearly two dozen people were injured.

The disruption crippled Bangladesh's garment industry, the country's biggest export earner, with dozens of factories shutting for the day.

The riots came after stone-throwing crowds clashed with police over the weekend. Factory workers say high food prices have meant many have little to eat, and are demanding wage increases.

*'Bangladeshi garment workers strike over food prices'. R. Ramesh, *The Guardian*, 15 April 2008*

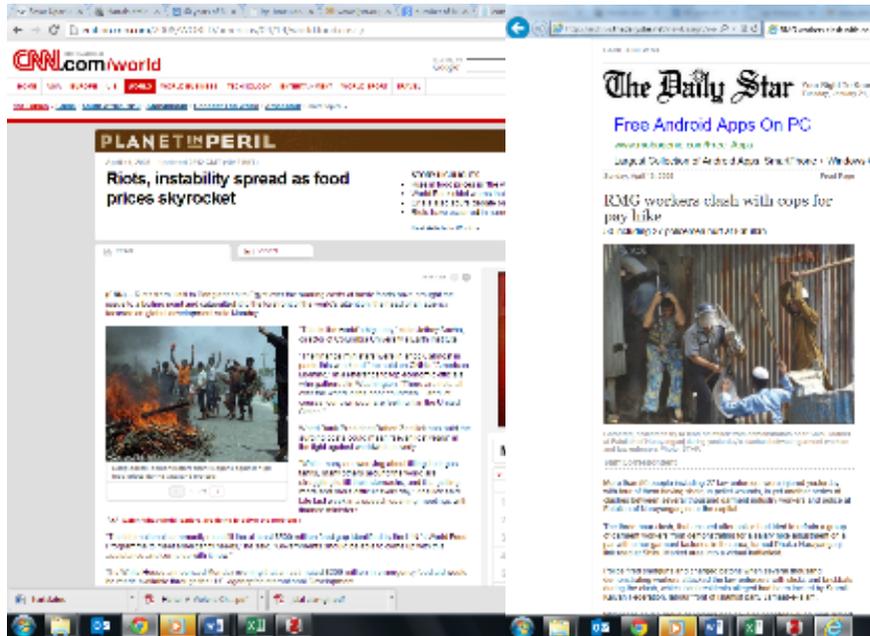
People in general think the Government is responsible if there is a problem. They know they get food from the market but people expect Government to ensure food supply and Government expects to have to. In other countries you have to reach the level of food riots. You don't need to have food riots in this country ...

Why [were there] no riots in Bangladesh? First of all, because Government acts first. Second, it is more difficult for riots to be generated because ... population, type of history ... social control is much more effective. So riots here are much less frequent or feasible or normal than in South Africa or any African place or even in Middle East

Interview with expert on Bangladesh food policy, Dhaka, 11 July 2013

The food riots that never were

In April 2008, at the height of the global food price crisis, the international media listed Bangladesh among the low-income countries in which food riots occurred. The Bangladesh media interpreted these events very differently (see below).



Source: <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/04/14/world.food.crisis/index.html#stc=Text> accessed 21 January 2014; <http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=31994> accessed 21 January 2014.

Figure 1 CNN: food riots in Bangladesh 14 April 2008; Daily Star: RMG worker pay protests 13 April 2008

An analysis of these events (however labelled) is at the centre of this paper, because we think understanding the motivations and means of the protesters will shed valuable light on the prospects for accountability for hunger. This is particularly urgent at a time when food prices have been unusually volatile and poor people around the world (for whom development has meant more integration with, and therefore more reliance on, markets for their food) have been less assured of food access. We think that popular mobilisation – whether riots or civil society organisation – may be the means of triggering public accountability for food security. In this paper we aim to explore these issues, looking at the motivations and means that people facing subsistence crises had for protesting, and at the types and levels of response these elicit from the policymakers and politicians with the power to respond.

1.1. Research Objectives

This paper was originally supposed to answer the central question raised by the parent project to which it contributes, namely,

Did popular mobilisation during the 2007–12 global food price crises increase accountability for hunger?

The parent project, a study called *Food Riots and Food Rights: the moral and political economy of accountability for hunger*, was designed to test the proposition, derived from a reading of how food riots featured in the politics of provisions in European history, that food protests could positively influence the institutionalisation of public action on food insecurity during food crises by making public authorities more responsive and accountable. We decided to explore this through an analysis across countries that had their similarities of socioeconomic context and political history, yet which had also experienced and responded to the 2008 and 2011 global food crises quite differently.

Having completed our case studies and comparative analysis, the central question still seems to help us make sense of how people and governments behaved in the other countries in the study – India, Kenya and Mozambique. But for Bangladesh, the question now seems wrong. Now that we have a deeper understanding of what happened, the interesting question to ask about Bangladesh is (as several interviewees pointed out):

Why was there so *little* popular mobilisation around food in Bangladesh during 2007–12?

An informed observer would have expected food riots in Bangladesh at this time. It has developed fast, yet millions of Bangladeshis still live on low and precarious incomes, spending more than half their incomes on staple foods (rice, essentially) alone. Millions of rural-urban migrants, many of them climate change refugees, live packed in close quarters, working the same jobs, shopping in the same bazaars, and facing the same hardships. Bangladesh has an unusually rich tradition of unruly politics, so food riots would hardly be a stretch. That rich grain traders gain from speculation and hoarding during periods of dearth is an article of faith in popular political culture. Yet, with the odd, interesting and highly particular exception of the garments workers, there were no major protests about the cost of food at this time. Explaining, exploring and resolving this puzzle is what this paper is all about.

1.2. Background to the Food Riots and Food Rights project

The need to strengthen accountability for food insecurity has become more pressing since the 2008 food price spike. Feeding the world in this context presents a political challenge – how to institutionalise accountability and responsiveness towards the hungry – as much as a technical or economic one. The period since the mid-2000s offers an opportunity to study the popular politics of accountability for hunger, because of the (not coincidental) rise in the level of popular mobilisation around food globally. The right to food movements that emerged in developing countries since the mid-2000s and the upsurge in food riots and protests since 2007 both signal strong popular pressures for a response to the increasing uncertainties people face around access to food. Yet little is known about who mobilises, why and what they seek to change. Nor are there convincing explanations of whether and how such mobilisation actually induces public policy changes that strengthen accountability for action on hunger. This study aims to contribute to filling these gaps.

There were three motivations for the study. The first was the recent period of food price volatility and associated protest, in particular the 2007–8 ‘food crisis’ which marked the end of three decades of low world food prices and the start of a period of global food price volatility featuring major spikes in 2008 and 2011 (Clapp 2009; Gilbert and Morgan 2010; Naylor and Falcon 2010; FAO 2009; Von Braun and Gebreyohanes 2012). Global food prices rose sharply and unpredictably after 2007 (see Figure 2) giving rise to concerns about the impacts on poverty and food insecurity.

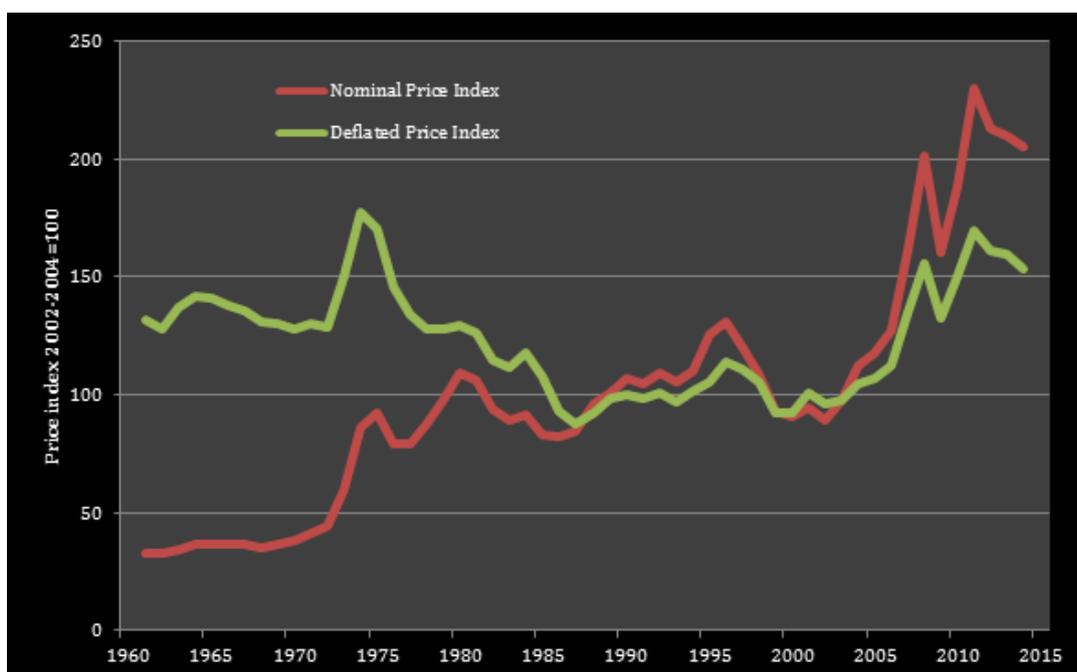


Figure 2 World food prices since 1960

Source: FAO Food Price Index <http://www.fao.org/world/foodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/> [accessed 16 October 2014]

In 2007–8, there were incidents labelled ‘food riots’ in as many as 30 countries, and the 2011 uprisings that turned into the Arab Spring were related to food prices (Schneider 2008; Lagi, Bertrand and Bar-Yam 2011). Cross-country research has correlated price spikes with unrest, finding, among other things, that low-income countries and weakly democratic polities are particularly prone to riots; and that the relationship between global food prices and civil unrest has become stronger with market integration and the ‘contagion’ effect of the internet and social networking (Arezki and Bruckner 2011; Arora, Swinnen and Verpoorten 2011; Bellemare 2011).

One of the concerns that this project aimed to address was that cross-country work tends to ‘sophisticate and quantify evidence which is only imperfectly understood’ (Thompson 1971: 77) because it relies substantially on ‘spasmodic’ explanations of why people riot that reduce people to bellied bodies. We learn little about the political perspectives on food markets that inform protests (although see Hossain 2009; Patel and McMichael 2009; Bush 2010; Brinkman and Hendrix 2011; O’Brien 2012). For Thompson, exploring the moral economy helps us address the question: ‘[b]eing hungry...what do people do? How is their behaviour modified by custom, culture, and reason?’ (Thompson 1971: 77–8). Our research is designed to understand not only what the motivations for such protests are, but also what Bohstedt has called ‘the politics of provisions’: the political opportunities or triggers that give rise to such protests, the means and modes of organisation and repertoires of political action, and the political and policy responses of the public authorities (Bohstedt 2014; 2010).

A second reason these issues merit research now is that ideas about rights to food, a set of rights with legally enforceable claims and institutional support, often within international human rights legal frameworks, are fast gaining ground. This includes in countries like India, where getting a basic meal has been the primary struggle for generations. If claims to food within the moral economy rest on custom or tradition, how might a legally enforceable human right to food change that? To what extent might the institutional and legal basis shape the ideas about how food markets should function?

A third reason to explore the causes and effects of food-related protest is the increasingly global integration of food markets. Do small country governments have the power to protect people against food price changes that arise in global commodity markets? If not, can moral economy ideas survive persistent enduring failures by public authorities? The moral economy in the historical past was fed by its successes; what if food riots fail, or are put down, or become so routine that they are safely ignored? How meaningful can protests and the ideas about the moral economy be if their objective is national governments faced with volatile global food markets?

1.3 Impacts and implications of the 2008 price spike and food price rises

The short-term impacts on food security of the 2008 price spike were generally considered to be potentially serious. A significant body of evidence suggested there were immediate cuts in consumption: substitution for lower value and less diverse diets, cuts in meal size, cuts in meal frequency among the poor (Matin 2009; World Bank 2013; Rashid, Hasan, and Hossain 2012), with particularly serious implications for women (Levy et al. 2013). This also meant short-term nutritional impacts: evidence from a re-survey of nutritional status among a cohort of poor families showed that between 2006 and 2008 they were spending more on food, and relatively more on rice (less dietary diversity or quality). The prevalence of wasting (acute malnutrition) among two to five year olds in rural areas rose from 17 to 23 per cent (an increase of 34 per cent) and in urban areas from 14 to 21 per cent (increase of 47 per cent) between 2006 and 2008. This implied an increase of two-thirds of a million children who were wasting (i.e. suffering from acute malnutrition)(Save the Children 2009).

The poor (around 40 per cent of the population were estimated to live below the official (ungenerous) poverty line in 2008) were hit the hardest because food already absorbed the majority of their spending when prices were low. Yet even those not officially designated poor, including white-collar workers and middle class groups, were hit particularly hard in the short term. An informal indicator of the severity of the shock as cited by the Department of Agriculture Marketing (the government agency tasked with producing monitoring data on food prices and availability) was that a 'long queue of even the middle class families was seen to purchase from the BDR shops ... during the crisis period' (Khan and Wadud 2010: 1).

Within the period under consideration, and possibly even as early as 2010, discussion of these adverse short-term impacts fell away to be replaced by recognition that cash incomes had started to rise and fast. The effects were particularly rapid in rural areas, and for rice farmers and workers associated with food grain production. But rapid and large wage and income rises were also documented in the informal sector and in industrial manufacturing (mainly the RMG sector, albeit from a low starting point). The emerging policy consensus is that in the medium term, food price rises have been a boon for Bangladesh's poor, because they have pushed up rural wages and ultimately urban wages too, as the surplus labour force has been absorbed (see Hossain 2010; Zhang et al. 2013). Most vitally, the rice wage – the amount of rice the daily wage rate can buy – has increased significantly in the past few years. Data from the 2011–12 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey found that the rice wage rate was now more than three times average daily household needs, at more than 7kg per day (A.U. Ahmed *et al.* 2013).

Although the recent rise in cash incomes is seen in development policy circles within Bangladesh as an unmitigated good, this development also marks a sharp acceleration in the process of commodification in Bangladesh. This is manifested in: a) greater dependence on

wage markets and cash incomes across the board; b) growing dependence on women's paid work, possibly at the expense of their unpaid caring labour and/or possibilities for leisure and wellbeing and with significant implications for gender roles; c) deeper dependence on food markets which can, demonstrably, be volatile and unreliable; and d) a likely increase in the nuclearisation of household relations and a decline in social cohesion within moral communities.

That is, the recent sharp rise in food prices is likely to have been associated with a series of social upheavals and trends with mixed impacts on human wellbeing.

So who were the winners and the losers? In the short term, the losers comprised mainly poor people on low and precarious incomes but also lower middle income groups on fixed wages or salaries. This latter group includes public sector workers, including teachers, nurses, clerical workers and manual workers. In the medium-term, wages and incomes have been pushed up. There is considerably more controversy over the winners from food price rises. There is a widespread popular belief in the idea that market actors of various kinds and at different levels tend to benefit from price spikes and other kinds of food crises, because of the scope for profiteering from speculation and hoarding.

Such groups tend to include 'syndicates' or cartels with influence over national markets conditions, comprising small numbers of well-connected individual businessmen networked around specific commodity markets, particularly grain importers, and licence-holders to import or process various food items such as edible oil. More localised actors believed to benefit are large wholesalers, rice mill owners, storage owners (to a lesser extent), and the full range of types of local traders involved in the chain of grain purchase from farmers through to retail.

It is not only during food price spikes, shortages or other such shocks that these groups are understood to make undue profits: in 'normal' periods, too, food traders are popularly believed to be unscrupulous and satisfied to make what are seen as excessive profits from illicit or illegal practices in the wholesale or retail of food. In the past decade, this has included food adulteration – the use of additives to process food to prevent it perishing or to enhance its appearance to buyers. High food prices raise the returns from food adulteration, which may explain why the past decade has seen a perceived rise in the practice, an upsurge of public opinion against such practices, and powerful new legislation to curb it.

There is a substantial literature in support of food trade liberalisation in Bangladesh, which stresses that private sector participation in food grain markets has greatly improved their efficiency, and in particular has stabilised prices during crises (see Ravallion 1985; Del Ninno, Dorosh and Smith 2003; Adams and Richard 1998; Dowlah 2006; Dorosh 2001). Yet another body of literature offers close-grained accounts showing that rice market performance is uneven, and that market intermediaries have a strong local effect which can amount to significant distortions in volatile times (Crow 1989; Crow and Murshid 1994; Adams and Richard 1998; CPD 2008). A key conclusion appears to be that efforts to control or tighten grain market practices during food crises tend to increase the tendency to speculate or hoard.

Although rice producers benefited in the medium term from food price rises, it is not clear that they did so in the short term, or that smaller farmers benefited as much as larger farmers.

This is largely because smaller farmers tend to rely more on pre-harvest trader credit to cover input costs, and so to sell grain at lower prices when the market price is low. Over the medium term, both smaller and larger farmers have been able to gain from stable higher prices, but volatility still has more adverse impacts on smaller farmers, who are less able to buffer against price shocks, including input prices. In their most recent analysis of poverty trends in Bangladesh, the World Bank has noted the decoupling of land ownership trends from poverty reduction trends: while this is presented positively as evidence that landlessness no longer so fully condemns rural people to a permanent state of poverty, it is also arguably true that poor people have been pushed off the land and into non-farm activities because land ownership is so closely guarded by powerful groups. This process is likely to accelerate as the value of food crops rises. Farm size is not large in Bangladesh as a whole, but the past decade has seen a proportional increase in the numbers of rural landless households but a relative decline in the proportion of farm and farm labour households, suggesting a concentration of control over the benefits of agriculture (BBS 2009).

The industry elite, comprising factory owners and their association leadership, had considerable potential to benefit in the medium term from the food price spike. This was because while RMG workers were hit particularly hard by the price spike, there was considerable political pressure on government to act to control price rises and/or to mitigate their impacts on low-income populations, particularly the politically volatile urban groups. If the outcome had been large-scale efforts to provide targeted support to such groups through, for instance massive permanent rationing programmes as had been in place until the early 1990s, this would have constituted in effect a subsidy to manufacturing industry, because it would have reduced the pressure to increase wages.

In the longer term, however, poor nutrition is likely to have had an adverse impact on the productivity of the labour force, and so on the scope for industrial upgrading and competitiveness. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the industry leadership did not draw connections between nutrition and labour productivity. By contrast, workers' leaders and workers themselves do draw such connections, recognising the impacts on ill health of poor diets.

Local elites, comprising both customary community leaders and elected representatives at the Union Parishad and upazila or sub-district level, benefited from the price spike to the extent that food transfer schemes and new social protection programmes such as the 100 days employment scheme, were rolled out or expanded during this period. The scope for corruption aside, these schemes tend to enable a considerable amount of discretion in beneficiary selection because of the rationing involved. This enables local elites to use resources for patronage purposes, so that the increase in food security and social protection schemes are of direct benefit to the political goals of local elites.

Two key ideas have been influential within domestic political discourse, and were themselves influenced by the food price spikes, over this period. The first is the Dreze-Sen thesis that famines do not occur in democratic regimes with a free press. This thesis was

explicitly cited in some civil society/thinktank discussions at a time when overt criticism of the unelected military backed CTG regime was constrained. This referred to the perception that the CTG regime was relatively ineffectual in its handling of the 2008 crisis, and that their apparent lack of responsiveness reflected the weakness of popular pressure on public policy at the time. For political parties, food price spikes are politically intolerable because of the acute sensitivities to acute hunger resulting from the political history of the country. The view that the CTG regime responded inadequately because of its lack of electoral pressure also resonated with ordinary citizens on low incomes, some of whom when interviewed in 2009 noted that a 'political government' would have done more to protect people. It is not clear that an elected government could in fact have done more to buck the global food price spike, particularly once India closed its borders. However, the coincidence of the timing is likely to have reinforced the power of this idea. It is notable that in the most recent democratic transition crisis of 2013, the customary reversion to the idea that the army should take over from dysfunctional party politics has been aired rarely and attracted tepid support compared to previous eras.

A second important idea is that which primarily concerns policymaking circles, including the international development partners and their supporting research and thinktanks. This is that reliance on the global food economy is sufficient to guard against food crises: a particularly major policy shift has been the significant increase in public food stocks storage capacity – and the corresponding acceptance of the need for such stocks. Although this was not fully acknowledged in our interviews, this marks a considerable about-turn from the more neo-liberal faith in international trade as the best means of smoothing food price volatilities even in the short term. The current state of thinking, even within the World Bank, once the champion of cutting public food stocks, appears to be that government preparedness is vital, because international trade (demonstrably) cannot be relied upon because some countries may introduce protectionist domestic policies. The ideological ideal – of a fully free global market in food grains – may not have suffered, but its application in the real world does appear to have been challenged.

1.4 How this paper is organised

This paper is one of four country case studies produced to research these questions through the Food Riots and Food Rights project, and it focuses exclusively on the Bangladesh research findings. It is organised as follows:

- Section 2 discusses the key concepts, hypotheses or propositions involved in the research questions, and then sets out the research methodology, including a detailed discussion of each of the three main components of the primary research;
- A reader who is interested less in the mechanics of research and more in its findings should skip straight to Section 3, which sets out findings about the protests which did occur in this period, based on a political events catalogue and qualitative case studies

of protest groups and events;

- Section 4 discusses the findings about the policy response, setting these in the context of the policy process in Bangladesh;
- Section 5 concludes with an analysis and discussion of the findings, and some implications for policy.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Concepts and Research Questions

The research methodology has been designed to test the proposition that popular mobilisation increased accountability for food insecurity during the 2007–12 period of food price volatility; for the purposes of this Bangladesh case study, the findings address the question of why relatively little protest took place, despite the conditions for such protest apparently being ripe. We do this through a close examination of the small number of protests that did occur, to understand who felt compelled to protest, and the nature of their grievance and demands. We also look at relevant policy changes and decisions during the period, interpreting these in light of the views of policymakers and informed observers.

Food riots

The paper focuses on protests around food during this period – who protested, why and to what effect – because these grant us access to the moral and political economy of food security policies at a time of great global price volatility. A key notion is that of ‘food riots’, and at the heart of the paper is an exploration of a set of events that may or may not be termed such. During our interviews with carefully selected key informants in Bangladesh, we repeatedly faced the same question. ‘Why focus on food riots? There were no food riots here’. Our answer: ‘That is not what the international media said’. In truth, there is a genuine ambiguity here, and it is not clear that our research can finally resolve it. Much depends on what you think a ‘food riot’ is; more still on how reportage of the garments workers’ protests (then and now, as their struggle continues) is filtered through media biases on the one hand, and the commanding political interests surrounding the Bangladesh garments industry, on the other. No research is likely to be able to pronounce definitively on these events. The present paper does more than most by offering a perspective on them informed by multiple sources of data, and varying levels and modes of analysis. The picture we provide of the happenings around food policy in 2007–12 is therefore kaleidoscopic – it offers glimpses and insights into complex matters from different angles, rather than a simple reflection. Yet we feel this better grasps the complex realities of these events than a simple picture ever could; it also reflects the very real challenges of researching our chosen topic, with its various political interests and ideologies still at work.

The very idea of a ‘food riot’ warrants attention. Who decides when a protest is a food riot? And why apply that particular label? One conclusion we reached early on during this research is that the use of that label is itself a political act, primarily by the media – an intervention about a state, its people and the relations between them – more than a simple description of reality (see, for instance, Sneyd, Legwegoh and Fraser 2013). ‘The food riots that never were’ of the title refers to the ambiguities around the garments workers’ protests. But it also refers to the

relative absence of such protests. As we will see, there was a small number of relatively minor protests at this time, of which by far the most important were the garments workers' protests of early to mid-2008, in terms of timing (they took place more or less simultaneously with comparable events in Haiti, Senegal and other low-income countries), scale, and in relation to the media and political attention they attracted. The present research uncovers four distinctly different views of these events.

- The international media framed these as 'food riots', with connotations of spontaneity, anger, hunger and violence.
- The Bangladeshi media and policy elite viewed these (in our view, quite reasonably and credibly) as protests against low wages, with the 2008 protests a continuation of the longer struggle for higher wages and better working conditions in general.
- Garments workers and their leaders took the view that their protests were centrally about wages and conditions, but that the rapid rise in the cost of food was vital to the struggle and a trigger for mobilisation at that particular moment. The slogan, '*Dam komao, banchte dao*' ('bring prices down, let us live') was used. The Bangladeshi media focused on the wages, rather than the cost of living, aspect of the struggle.
- Our view is that most 'food riots' dissolve into their local political particularities when looked at closely. That is, 'food riot' is a term with an internationally recognised meaning, but in reality, few political events to which the term is applied meet the simple criteria of spontaneity, anger, hunger and violence in times of price spikes associated with the term: looked at closely, there are always other factors involved. The term 'food riots' was very likely just as applicable to the garments workers' protests of April 2008 as to any other similar events. But these are more appropriately termed 'subsistence protests' and their political significance makes sense only in the context of their longer struggle over wages and conditions, and the interactions with industry and public authorities they have engendered.

This paper puts the ambiguities around the 2008 garments workers' protests at the heart of the analysis, but is not about those events alone, or even primarily. Instead, these are of interest because bringing their features into sharper focus takes a microscope to the dense, contentious politics of protest and policies around food – the biggest and most vital economic sector of all. As we will show below, the garments workers and the small number of other protests stand out as oddities at this time: protests of all kinds were banned under the military-backed unelected caretaker regime, but even then angry hungry people could have been expected to protest the unaffordability of food in their masses. They did not, and so the reasons why the garments workers did so, can help us to understand the rules, the norms, opportunities, motivations and meanings of food-related protests and the policy response at this time.

Food rights and the moral economy

The term 'food riot' is familiar from European social history, in particular seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and France. At moments of scarcity or high food prices, typically during periods when economies were adjusting towards more market-orientation and free market ideologies were in the ascendant, protests often erupted around what have come to

be known as ideas about the moral economy. The moral economy can best be summarised as a set of ideas about the right to subsistence even during crises, and the responsibilities of the public authorities to act to protect that right. European protesters often argued that the right to eat came before to the right to profit during moments of dearth, and they dramatised or enacted that right by seizing transported goods, preventing food exports, selling bread at ‘fair prices’ and so on. Moral economy ideas were characterised not only by their content – ideas about food rights at their heart – but also about their form: they were articulated as customary, the very basis of the legitimacy of rule, and they were only articulated at times when food rights were seen to be abrogated – they justified protests during moments of crisis, but more usually went unspoken, tacit, assumed. During crises when public authorities failed to act, moral economy norms or food rights could be invoked. Within Bangladesh, we found the idea of the moral economy was most usefully operationalised as ‘ideas about how [food] markets should work’. This implicitly introduces ideas about rights to food, to the extent that people believe markets should work in ways that are consistent with (and not opposed to) their rights to food.

2.2 Research design

Research questions

Across the parent project, we collectively structured our work with the following research questions:

- A. To what extent did grievances about hunger and food price volatility feature in popular mobilisation in 2007–12?
 - What were the grievances?
 - How were grievances framed/articulated?
 - Who mobilised?
 - When and how did mobilisations occur?
- B. To what extent were mobilisations between 2007–12 underpinned by ruptures in moral economies?
 - What do people expect of state and market with regard to food?
 - What is the contemporary moral economy? What are its dynamics? How does it draw on history, memory and tradition? How does it vary among different groups?
 - Does the moral economy govern political life and political culture?
 - How does ‘globalisation’ impact on mobilisation, moral economy and political response?
- C. What was the political and policy response to mobilisations (or to perceived problems of hunger and food price volatility)?
 - How was the country affected by food price volatility in 2007–12?
 - What was the nature and quality of response?
 - Did/does the policy/political response (whether to mobilisations or to perceived

problems of hunger and food price volatility) amount to increased institutional accountability for hunger?

Research components and research tools

The research design took the form of three main components, each with their own research tools that were developed collectively and then adapted to each country context. These were:



Picture 1 Garments workers' 'mess' accommodation, Savar

- I **Political events catalogue.** This involved media content analysis. The overall approach to this was
 - a. newspaper selection
 - b. a search protocol
 - c. development of a database to enable quantitative and qualitative analysis.

In Bangladesh, this involved analysis of online and physical archives for the period 2007–12 for three daily newspapers: the English language *Daily Star*, the Bangla *Ittefaq* and the Bangla *Prothom Alo*. Between them these comprise the most influential newspapers, including that with the highest circulation (*Prothom Alo*), and a spread across the political spectrum. A detailed description of the methodology, including design, search terms and process, and data management, of the political events catalogue is provided in the Annex.

II **In-depth case studies of protests and protest communities.** Partly on the basis of the political events catalogue and partly based on our prior knowledge and interviews with activists (see below), we selected two case studies of protests to study in more detail. One of these was rural, a case study of an ongoing local campaign for ‘fair markets’ in the poor north-western district of Gaibandha. This overlapped with the period in question. Moral economy ideas and subsistence protests were involved, and so the case was selected as having the potential to shed light on the issues we were interested in. The second was the peri-urban industrial case of the garments workers’ protests in Savar, north of Dhaka. We give a description of each case below. To help us make sense of these case studies, we also undertook interviews with a small number of selected activists, national and local, with links to these protest groups. In researching these case studies, we used three main tools:

- ‘listening posts’, in which researchers identified public spaces in which relevant groups could be observed and local public discussions engaged in. This was to help us understand what people were talking about (before we entered with our research agenda) and to help us identify appropriate interviews and focus group participants;
- focus groups discussions, with prepared protocols, with groups of people who were known to have taken part in protests, or who were from the area and of the same social and occupational profile as people who participated in protests;
- interviews with local key informants – journalists, leaders and activists, officials, etc.

Case study 1: Readymade garments workers’ (RMG) struggles in Savar

The RMG case study was selected because industrial activism was the main, if not the only, type of event to which the label ‘food riot’ was conceivably applicable (although this is controversial). Apart from the routine and institutionalised campaigns of *hartal* by opposition parties and an emerging repertoire of *hartal* (an all-out strike) use by Islamist groups protesting against progressive policies on women during the period, there were few other significant forms of street or unruly politics (demonstrations, marches, riots etc.) during the period 2007–12.¹ To understand the nature and content of popular mobilisation linked to the food price issue it was crucial to understand how the core element of the urban working class – the RMG workers in and around Dhaka city – were experiencing it and mobilising around it. Key relevant features of the RMG workers’ (ongoing) campaign for higher wages include that it has been closely connected to the food price rises: activists mobilised around a ‘living wage’ referring directly

¹ Note that the Shahbag mass movement supporting the war crimes trials and pro-secular causes more generally took place in 2013, after our time period ended.

to rapid rises in the cost of living and that workers' wages failed to keep pace; the connection to food prices was particularly direct in the early stages of the campaign, and in fact pre-date our period (see IGS 2006). It has also been widely distributed across the industry, although its heartlands are the urban locations selected for the case study. The effects have been severe in terms of impact on human life, property, production and business, and national in terms of its implications: the RMG industry contributed 76 per cent of export earnings in 2008–9 (MoF 2009) and as long ago as 2002 was estimated to earn 10 per cent of GDP (Bhattacharya, Rahman and Raihan 2002). The national significance of the RMG industry makes it possible for industry leaders to frame industrial disputes as a national emergency, because of the impacts on exports and the balance of payments. The campaign for wage increases, while ongoing at the time of writing, has also arguably had some successes: wages have risen; and the issue of how wages are set is on the policy agenda.

Case study 2: the fair markets movement in Gaibandha

The 'fair markets' movement is far smaller and localised albeit in a reasonably large local market at the confluence of five villages in the poor under-developed north Bengal district of Gaibandha. Like the RMG wages movement, the fair markets movement is ongoing and:

- is connected to food and agricultural input price rises: small farmer and trader activism around market governance dates back to 2000, yet was re-invigorated during the period of the commodity price spikes; these groups feel squeezed both as producers and as consumers;
- involves campaigns to tackle corruption in market governance, particularly in relation to illegal taxes or 'tolls' and other forms of unfair (and sometimes illegal) market practices such as hoarding; the movement thus mobilises around corruption and the local manifestations of patterns of politics and power that are national in their origins;
- has involved leftist political parties and social movements;
- has been unsuccessful in establishing its claims over the long term, despite short-term successes.



Picture The market committee office in Dariyapur, Gaibandha

Note: the market committee is ostensibly non-political, but note the party political poster propped up outside.

The Gaibandha fair markets movement dates back more than a decade. In principle, the main actor is the *Khudro Babshayi Shartho Shongrokhon Shomity* ('Committee for the protection of the interests of small businesspeople' - KBSS), an association of small businessmen or traders in farm produce. The local *krishak* or farmer group has also been involved, and a closely associated struggle has been rice farmers' mobilisation for 'fair prices' that took place in 2012 and was identified through the political events catalogue.

The key events – major demonstrations, *haat hartals* (market strikes), violent responses and the use of 'false cases' by powerful groups – are concentrated in the 2007–8 period. While this may seem to confirm our starting assumptions that sharp food price rises would trigger popular mobilisation this does not appear to have been the direct cause of these events. This is because the period of the first food price spike (the lead up to mid-2008) coincided with the period of rule by the caretaker government (January 2007 to December 2008), and with a sharp break in the usual rules of governance, both economic and political. This was preceded and followed by periods of unusually high levels of extortion and abuse by the politically connected and party-aligned market committee leadership, who have party thugs to back them and the local administration often also aligned behind them. These patterns of governance created both the grievances and opportunities around which movement organisers could mobilise the frustrated small farmers and traders who bring their goods to the market for retail or wholesale.

III **Policy response interviews.** Finally, we interviewed a small number of carefully selected policymakers and experts, scholars and researchers. With these individuals our aims were to reconstruct the policy thinking and practice of the period, to gain a sense of what the motivations and understandings may have been, as part of our political economy analysis of how food security policies were made during the 2007–12 period, and why. These include officials in the Ministry of Food including high-level bureaucrats, technocrats in the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (credited with much food policy responsiveness and innovation), relevant international donors in the food security/social protection field, some field-level officials, and researchers (because Bangladesh has a wealth of world class scholars on food and agricultural policy issues). The aims were to trace the sequence of events and to assess the influences on thinking and responses including the influence of the media, the interests and ideas underlying the responses, and the extent to which the outcomes have led to institutionalised responses in terms of political organisational and/or policy organisational or practice change.

2.3 Data and analysis

The overall research approach has been to take into account multiple perspectives at different levels of the system, through analysis of different kinds of data, qualitative, quantitative, factual and subjective.

Data collection and data management

Data collection began by training the field research teams, experienced social scientists (anthropologists and sociologists) in the concepts and research design over several days. After brief scoping field visits and pre-tests of the research tools, fieldwork took place over three weeks during August to November 2013. The lead researchers (authors of the current paper) were involved in all aspects of the fieldwork. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in pairs to facilitate note-taking, and then transcribed in the language of the interview. These were then uploaded into NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software and coded using preset codes. Details of the political events catalogue are available in the annex.

Research ethics

A key concern in research of this nature is inevitably the safety and security of research participants and researchers. Our overall research design was checked by the IDS Research Ethics Committee. We explained the purpose of the research and sought permission for the use of data including images collected as part of this research. Where this has been requested, information provided during the research process has been removed from transcripts. Where requested, interviewees and focus group discussants have been anonymised. Where, as in the case of the Dariyapur fair markets struggle, the identities of the KBSS are a matter of public record (and indeed, they face criminal charges) anonymity was not requested. Public figures such as officials have been named, where this helped to triangulate the analysis.

3. POPULAR MOBILISATION AND PROTESTS, 2007–12: WHO, WHEN, HOW AND WHY

This section of the paper presents findings about the extent, form and distribution of popular mobilisation – riots, demonstrations, protests and civil society action – in which subsistence and/or the cost of living were a significant factor during 2007–12. It also looks at the ideological content or moral economy thinking around which groups mobilised, and the political opportunity structures within which these mobilisations took place, including the bases for collective action and the interactions between protesters and public authorities.

3.1 Measuring political action: challenges and limitations

The discussion which follows comes with a health warning: the process of constructing the political events catalogue has yielded important lessons about the challenges and limitations of measuring mass political action. First, there have been relatively few serious efforts to measure different kinds of unruly political events using any method, as below suggests. Second, for Bangladesh (and almost certainly elsewhere) relying on media reports for raw data about political events means depending on sources which vary widely in terms of quality of reportage, inclusion and exclusion bias, interpretation and representation. This means that no single source is likely to be authoritative even of crude counts of events: for instance, the *Daily Star* (the main English language newspaper, selected as an authoritative source by at least one other credible study using political event counts²) was found to exclude many local political events covered by its sister Bangla language paper *Prothom Alo* and/or the established Bangla paper the *Dainik Ittefaq*.

An interesting related pattern from the initial search of the international media was that national news media tended to identify events in other countries as food riots: within their own borders such events were more often framed as organised political events rather than spontaneous expressions of hungry anger. This suggests that the ‘food riots’ label is itself contentious and its use marks a political intervention in its own right and beyond national borders: arguably, within contemporary global political economy, being seen to have had ‘food riots’ signals a fundamental failure of governance.

Media biases in the inclusion and framing of the content of news reports are also important. This is most notable in the Bangladesh case in the interpretation of the garments workers’ protests: while activists and RMG workers emphasised the importance of the rising cost of living in driving their demands for wage increases, media coverage tends to exclude explicit mention of living costs in coverage of later episodes of industrial conflict. This means that the

² We refer here to the late Jalal Alamgir’s paper ‘Political Violence as a Core Governance Challenge’, presented to the IGS 40th Anniversary Conference on Governance in Bangladesh in December 2011. <http://igs-bracu.ac.bd/images/stories/40years/jalal%20alamgir.pdf> [accessed 21 January 2014].

extent to which food prices were included within the grievances of protesting workers is likely to have been underplayed.

The limitations of the data collected for the political events catalogue include the possibility that relevant local political events are under-counted. The method used here overcame this by defining relevant events as those of relevance to national policy changes by virtue of having reached national policymaker attention through national press coverage. This was ensured by including analysis of three major papers, at least one of which is likely to be read by national policymakers and those who influence them. To avoid the possibility that different labels or terms may be applied to different events, search terms were broadly defined for the online archive searches and for the hand searches of physical archives.

3.2 The extent and distribution of popular action around food

Although Bangladesh is known for its unruly political culture, there have been few systematic efforts to measure protests, demonstrations, strikes, etc. While this would be enough to prevent us from gaining a sense of the relative importance of food-related popular action, it is further compounded by the fact that during the peak period of the food price spikes, 2007 and 2008, Bangladesh was under a state of emergency that banned political protest. This background is important for assessing the extent, distribution and nature of popular action around food during this period.

In several respects Table 1 below gives a distorted picture of the distribution of unruly politics in Bangladesh. The origins of the now-ubiquitous *hartal* were in the anti-colonial uprisings of the first part of the twentieth century, and until the present, it is occasionally still used to express mass political grievances through non-institutionalised channels. But it is more regularly now part of routine party political competition; its main protagonists are professional politicians and their 'cadres' and paid supporters, not a mass support base (Suykens and Islam 2013). So the ubiquity of *harta*s specifically reflects the unruly nature of party politics rather than the prevalence of mass protests. By contrast, the figures on industrial conflict greatly underestimate its level and seriousness. To date there have been no notable efforts to measure or analyse the scale of the RMG industrial conflict, and the figures in Table 1 fail to convey a true sense of the numbers, scale or seriousness of the garments workers' protests against low wages, rights abuses, unsafe working conditions and the cost of living since 2005.

As the inadequacies of existing data on protest politics in Bangladesh are more likely to under- rather than over-estimate the universe of such protests (Alamgir 2011), it can be credibly argued that the total number of food-related events is likely to comprise a very small proportion of the total such actions during the 2007–12 period. Given the extent of poverty, hunger and vulnerability in Bangladesh, the direct nature of the transmission of the impacts of the 2008 food price spike on retail prices, and the predisposition towards unruly political action as suggested by Table 1, the relatively small numbers of food-related protests during periods of rapid price rises merits explanation.

Table 1 Political event counts since the 1990s

Source/method	Period	Type of political event	Number of events (days)
(UNDP 2005) compiled from various sources	1991–94 1995–98 1999–2002	<i>Hartal</i>	216 279 332
(Moniruzzaman 2009) compiled from national news sources	1991–94 1995–98 1999–2002	<i>Hartal</i>	216 279 332
(Harrison 2013); no methodology detailed	1991–96 1996–2001 2001–6 2009–12	<i>Hartal</i>	226 215 176 17
(Moniruzzaman 2009); compiled from (S.A. Islam 2006) based on a single national news source (<i>Sangbad</i>)	1991–2001	Political conflicts	2,423
(J. Alamgir 2011) compiled from <i>Daily Star</i> online searchable archives	2001–6	Political violence of which: 'Terrorism' 'general political violence'	2,859 336 2,405
(Rahaman <i>et al.</i> 2011) based on unspecified media sources	August 2010– January 2011	Industrial disputes (RMG)	30
Newspaper article cited in <i>Daily Star</i> (unruly politics in Bangladesh book chapter)	January–June 2010	Industrial disputes (RMG)	5
Political events catalogue for present study (2014) <i>Daily Star</i> online archive <i>Prothom Alo</i> online archive <i>Dainik Ittefaq</i>	2007–12 2009–12 2007–12	Protests linked to food prices/ cost of living	28 56 86

Note: it is not clear whether the UNDP and Moniruzzaman use the same sources, but the hartal figures are identical. By our definition, there is likely to be a high degree of overlap between industrial disputes and cost of living protests.

3.3 Profile of subsistence protests, 2007–12

The relevant protests chiefly involved organisations of low paid wage workers, private and public sector, as well as some organised groups of informal sector farmers and self-employed groups, with civil society groups and political parties, particularly far-left groups (which are very small), taking up these issues to some extent. Table 2 lists all groups and organisations mentioned in all news articles about all types of political events related to protests or demand-making relating to food in this period – riots, protests, demonstrations as well as organised civil society events ('human chains', petitions, roundtable discussions). Several points stand out:

- food-related protests comprised a small proportion of political events;
- but such protests were more likely to occur when retail prices of basic foodstuffs were at their peak (see). That many of these occurred during the 2007–8 ban on political protest suggests that protesters were convinced of the seriousness and justice of their protests;
- the main political parties took up issues of the cost of living in the period, particularly

while they were in opposition. Food prices specifically reached the level of an issue within party political competition and became part – albeit not a major part – of the grievances of opposition parties. Both parties when in opposition led protests concerned with the rising cost of living;

- there was a small number of efforts by civil society groups to raise the issues of food prices (in particular);
- both civil society and party political protests were less common and less prominent than organised labour and worker welfare organisations;
- organised labour and worker welfare groups were by far the most prominent, with garments workers' protests leading the fray: almost 40 per cent of all groups mentioned in relation to protests at this time were garments workers or their organisations (specifically).³ The next most important category were farmers and fishers and their welfare groups / councils, with almost one-fifth of all mentions. One-tenth were of other labour organisations including low paid public sector workers' unions and groups. The rural poor, including destitute women and people affected by disasters or demanding relief comprised a mere 6 per cent of all mentions.

Table 2 Protesters and petitioners as described in articles on political events

v		Social movement / civil society groups		Occupational groups		Trades unions/ labour organisations		Other	
Main parties		Consumer Association of Bangladesh	2	Garments workers	35	Worker welfare associations and councils	13	Villagers/ poor people / destitute women 10	
Leftist parties (CPB, DLA, RWPB)	7	Student and cultural groups	4	Farmers/ fishers	17	Blue-collar labour unions/ federations	9		
Local political representatives	4	Thinktanks	2	Economists	2	Bangladesh land port workers' league	1		
Parliamentary Committee on Food and Disaster Ministry	1	Development NGOs	2	intellectuals, professionals, journalists	2	Garments workers	27		
		<i>Rajshahi Rakhya Songram Parishad</i>	2	fertiliser dealers	1	Public sector worker unions/ organisations	7		
		employers and business associations	3	agricultural land owners	1	Coal miners	1		
		local citizen groups	2						
	21		17		58		57		10

³ Media coverage of these events is sketchy, and predominantly frames them as demands for pay increases, with little to no mention of the rising price of food or the cost of living. This is despite the fact that RMG workers' protests were linked to food prices in the international media (as noted above) and that primary research with garments workers and activists identified food and other cost of living rises as a major motivating factor. The absence of mentions of food costs in the reporting on garments workers' protests will be analysed in more detail below.

Note: this table takes the news article rather than the event as the unit of analysis. Figures used here are of citations for each time the group was mentioned and so provide a sense of how the events were covered in the media, not of the extent of activism by each group.

For a regular newspaper reader, the impression of the distribution of the impacts of the food price rises is likely to have been that people on low wages – industrial workers, the urban working and lower middle classes – were most affected and most likely to protest. This is consistent with the findings from the policy response survey, in which policymakers and scholars commonly noted that people on fixed salaried or waged incomes were most directly hit by food price rises. By contrast, informal sector and daily wage workers were understood to be better-positioned to bid up their wages, at least in the short term, than industrial or public sector workers.

The *Daily Star*'s reportage displays some urban bias, and fewer agriculture-related grievances were reported than in the *Ittefaq*. Agricultural input costs emerged as a key point of rural contention as fertiliser and irrigation fuel costs rose with food and other commodity prices in 2007–8 and again in 2010–11. In general, grievances blended a concern with both consumption issues – high prices, the improper regulation of the food retail trade, wages and worker benefits, social protection needs – and more structural or production concerns about economic development and governance, and the regulation of agricultural markets and the food wholesale trade.

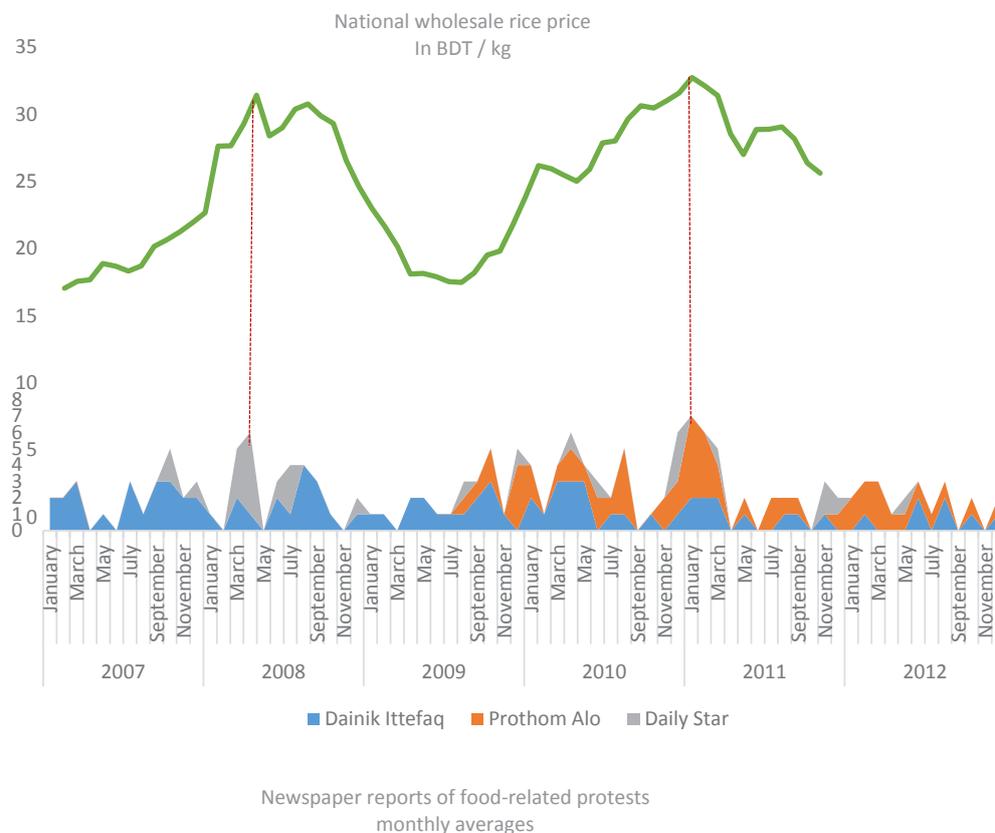


Figure 3 The price of rice, and reported protest

Source: Rice price: Department of Agricultural Marketing, Bangladesh; events: political events catalogue, *Food Riots* project

Note: the *Prothom Alo* archive starts from mid-2009; USD1: Bangladesh taka (BDT) 77.46 [as of 16th October 2014; source xe.com]

Protests about food were often connected to concerns about production, rather than merely consumption. This reflects the findings from the qualitative research of strong rural-urban connections within protesting groups, and a popular awareness including among the urban population, of farmer constraints and concerns. This means it makes little sense to view the political economy of food price rises as a contest between urban consumers and rural producers (as is often the case – see Swinnen 2011; Swinnen, Squicciarini and Vandemoortele 2011). Protests were overwhelmingly framed domestically, however, and there was no evidence that the global food economy or global policy were seen as either part of the problem or part of the solution to the problems people were experiencing.

In terms of targets, events covered in the *Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* tended to identify national government, in particular the executive and line ministries (e.g. food) as the main objects of the protests. With its stronger focus on local events, protests covered by the *Ittefaq* also included an almost equal number of events in which local officials (sub-district and lower-level officials and elected representatives) were the targets. A handful of events were protesting corporations and large companies, including foreign investors (the China Contractual Authority). Fully one-third of all targets of protests mentioned in all the articles were garments factory owners and their association, the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

These findings about the grievances, demands and targets of protests derived from the political events catalogue are broadly consistent with the more in-depth work conducted in the case studies of the garments workers' protests in Savar and the fair market movement in Gaibandha, as we will see in the next section. The key exception, as already noted, is the exclusion of considerations of food prices from the coverage of garments workers' protests, which will be discussed further below.

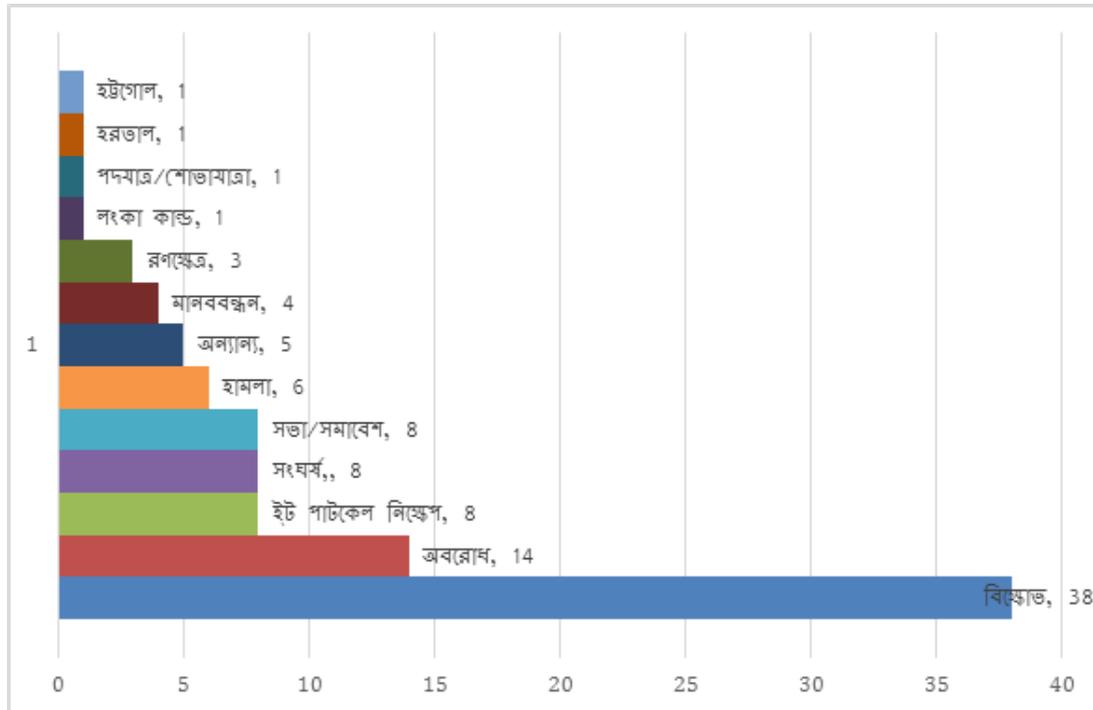


Figure 4 Repertoires of protest (in Bangla)

Source: Political events catalogue, *Dainik Ittefaq* archive

Bangla or Bengali has such a rich tradition and language of protest (in itself of some significance) that it makes sense to draw on the Bangla language descriptions of the events. Although many of them sound similar to each when translated into English, the different labels can signal quite distinct repertoires of political action to people familiar with street politics in Bangladesh. Figure 4 provides a basic count of the headline or main description given to the event in the newspaper, while Figure 5 does the same for the types of action named in the article (in some cases more than one action was mentioned). All are from the *Dainik Ittefaq*, which provided the relatively rich, local-focused archive of events.

Reflecting the dominance of industrial conflict in the sample, the description of the events and the actions taken are substantially more often unruly and disruptive (demonstrations, agitations, sieges, marches/processions) than civil (hearings, human chains, memoranda, discussions, petitions). This pattern extends also to the violent nature of these events: in some 30 events, or more than one-third of the total, vandalism of factories or vehicles and threats of violence occurred. The impression received from the news coverage is also that these were usually unorganised events – riots and agitations rather than organised lobbying or civil action: out of 84 events, 47 were described in terms that suggested spontaneity and lack of organisation, and 36 were characterised as organised or planned events.

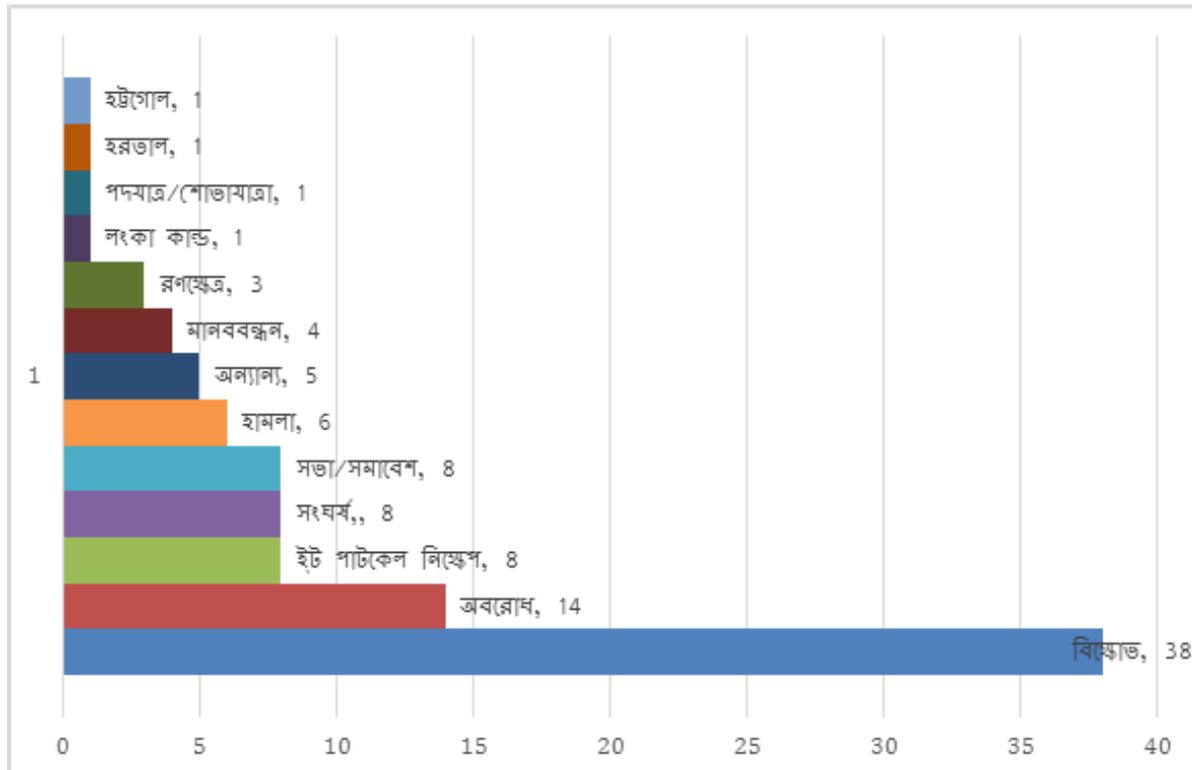


Figure 5 Types of action described

Note: n=95

Source: Political events catalogue, *Dainik Ittefaq* archive

3.4 Patterns of protest in the case studies

The RMG workers' protests

The first major protest events took place in the export processing zone (EPZ) in 2002, followed by events in 2004, 2006, 2009, 2010 and 2012 both in and outside the EPZ. From our interviews and discussions with activists, participants and workers who observed these events, these were largely spontaneous protests in which the central demand was increased wages and benefits, as well as payment of due wages and benefits. It should be noted that our research indicates that there are likely to have been many such protests, and those we detail here are not exhaustive of the actions during this time, even in this industrial area. They reflect the first-hand knowledge and experiences of the people we met who were willing to tell their stories. Note that it was not difficult to find people who had such experiences in this area, but many were reluctant to discuss them with outsiders. Below we provide a timeline of these events in order to glean lessons about their patterns, trends and implications.

Prior to the period of interest (2007–12), the workers in this area had already acquired a great deal of experience mobilising around wages and conditions, and had had some success in doing so, both in and outside the EPZ. In 2002 and 2004, large-scale protests took place

in and outside the EPZ. During protests over wage rises and against illegal termination of workers⁴ in 2002, five workers were shot dead by the Ansars (a quasi-official law enforcement agency usually contracted to provide industrial policing and security services). The struggle for compensation and medical care for the victims spread across other factories in the area. The protests continued for 20 to 25 days. No major political parties supported the workers but they eventually succeeded, winning wage increases, although the compensation was smaller than they had demanded. In the same area, in 2004, another struggle took place, this time with the main demand of no illegal sacking of workers. In one sweater factory, a demand was made to start a trade union. The police and local *mastaans*, or gangsters, were called in to put organisers off, after which they learned to organise and discuss outside the factory walls. A *missil*, or demonstration, was organised to enter the factory, after which a workers' organisation was permitted. The organisation or trade union enjoyed some successes in securing workers' basic rights in that factory over a period.

A key set of protests occurred in 2006 around raising the minimum wage, which in the EPZ was then BDT930 (basic monthly rate; now worth around \$12). This struggle was large in scale and spread rapidly through the EPZ. On this occasion, leftist political organisations were in support of the movement, although the two main parties (Awami League and BNP) were not. However, the workers adopted non-violent means, with participants from that time recalling that they did not want to destroy the factory from which they earned their living. Attacks on factories, incidents of arson and other violent action were not, in their view, carried out by garments workers but by 'outsiders'. After the 2006 protests, the minimum wage was raised to BDT1,662.

Until 2007, the workers' protests in this area were self-organising, without any external actors involved. After 2007, their mobilisation began to gain the support of workers' rights organisations, leftist coalitions and groups, and activist and civil society organisations, many with roots in the garments workers' struggles. Through this engagement, their repertoires widened to dialogue with factory owners and industry leaders, information campaigns through leafleting about workers' demands, and (peaceful) human chains.

Even when these new actors came on the scene, however, our informants noted that the main source of mobilisation remained through the factory, particularly the leadership of experienced 'in-charge' workers who commanded workers' respect. When an action was decided upon, the people in charge would tell a larger group of workers, who would then spread the word by mobile phone and other means. In other factories, according to other informants, even this relatively flat leadership was absent, and groups decided on actions without clear leadership. In the last few years, leadership in the non-EPZ factories shifted more towards workers in the knitwear as opposed to the garments factories.⁵

⁴ Labour laws on the termination of employment (including conditions, notice, pay etc.) are rarely followed, and protests are common; abrupt factory closures to avoid having to make severance or other payments are common.

⁵ It is not generally known outside Bangladesh that the industry has at least two distinct parts: knitwear and garments (often also known as cut-and-make or cut-make-trim – CMT). The key distinction for our purposes is that the knitwear part of the industry has always involved heavier machinery, and has always employed a larger proportion of men than the garments/CMT industry. The implication is that young men are more easily mobilised than young women, and it may indeed be the case that the rise in industrial disputes since the advent of the knitwear industry (which is newer than the garments sub-sector) owes to matters of gender in relation to protest. The knitwear sub-sector also has its own association – the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA). Other important differences in the labour patterns of the two sub-sectors include that knitwear workers are paid on piece-rates, and their work is seasonal. Knitwear workers argue that their rights are more easily abrogated, and that garments workers benefit from the

By 2007, workers in this area were accustomed to taking to the street and/or factory-based action. Actions in 2009, 2010 and 2012 are seen by workers in the area as relatively spontaneous and unorganised responses to the growing inadequacy of wages during a period of rapid price rises. Actions that started in one factory quickly spread to others, as news of wage increases were shared. In addition, ‘the movement’ was sporadic and stop-start and never sought a long-term solution to their problems: direct action stopped whenever a raise was realised, and re-started when the increased wages were found to be inadequate.

Workers stressed that industrial action enjoyed little to no meaningful party political support: the main parties rarely joined protests and although the small leftist political parties joined in actions later during the period, they played no significant role in organising workers. The garments workers involved in this research consistently expressed distrust of political parties of all stripes, generally taking the view that there was a mutual lack of interest between the workers’ struggle and party politics. One woman worker during a focus group discussion with non-active workers in Bhadail said: ‘the leaders of these parties were bought by the garments owners and you know what, the price is really cheap and all you need to give them is a bottle of wine’ (12 July 2013).

A male worker in a focus group with (non-active) male garments workers in Ashuliya said: ‘We do not believe in banners (of political parties) – that will compromise our movement’ (23 July 2013).

The view that party political actors were unimportant, absent or unwelcome is telling. One reason is that RMG factory ownership cuts across the Bangladeshi political elite. More than half (57 per cent and 56 per cent respectively) of members of the 2001–6 and 2008–13 parliament reported ‘business and industry’ as their major occupation; the dominance of the RMG sector in business and industry means that a high proportion of MPs are likely to have interests in the garments industry (Hossain 2014).

Mainstream political parties are unlikely to take on an issue that hurts their leadership so directly, or in which arguably neither has a strong political advantage. Second, the idea that leftist political groups are in essence thugs for hire is the mirror-image of the suspicion outside the workers’ struggle, that outsiders (probably Indian spies) have infiltrated protest movements to manipulate workers to push wages up and reduce Bangladesh’s competitive edge. Both views betray a conspiratorial view of industrial politics as a venal business in which nothing is as it seems. These views about the roles of party politics sit alongside a popular aversion to violent protest as opposed to the interests of the industry and national economic advancement more generally, and some considerable sympathy among non-elite groups with the struggle, in recognition that wages have been low and costs of living have risen.⁶

The targets of protests have shifted slightly over time. At first, and still now, these were mainly individual factory owners. Later, and as other actors came on the scene in supporting roles,

successes of the knitwear workers’ protests.

⁶ Some of these points are elaborated in N. Hossain (2014).

the targets shift towards public authorities, occasionally the industry leadership and relevant regulatory agencies. Despite the presence of some established leftist groups (such as the workers' wing of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and the Communist Party of Bangladesh) RMG workers' protests did not noticeably make common cause with other urban groups on fixed low incomes (such as other industrial or low paid service sector workers in the public or private sector). The protests may have sometimes been framed in terms of subsistence rights, but in their early days, they almost universally targeted factory owners for wage rises. Later they took on wider agendas such as the cost of living (a concern shared by other factory workers, and others outside the industry) and the minimum wage, as well as basic labour standards (mainly allowances and conditions).

Some protests as well as more civil society activism also included the demand for Open Market Sales⁷ (OMS) within factories. This was necessary because OMS grains are usually sold during working hours so that factory workers were excluded from this source of cheap food. During 2009 and 2010 OMS was temporarily introduced within factories, but as the scheme targets beneficiaries by requiring them to queue, the scheme worked imperfectly for factory workers; it was later discontinued. Although unlikely to have been an important policy in terms of numbers reached, grains sold or price stabilisation effects, the deployment of OMS in factories was nevertheless very important. This is because it signalled a shift in how garments workers were viewed, suggesting that their rights to food security were recognised as equivalent to those of other urban citizens, and that special steps were being taken to ensure their access was the same as any other citizen, by taking into account their particular modes of work and working hours. This makes the introduction of OMS in factories highly symbolic: the specific needs of industrial workers were recognised, and the responsibility or mandate for enabling their access to affordable food grains was accepted by the state.

Some final points about these struggles as recounted to our research teams:

- Protests can spread very rapidly across factories, regardless of whether they were in the EPZ or not; this is very likely due to the fact that workers live in the neighbouring areas, and many change jobs and so have networks across the industry, along which affiliations may be built and communications channelled. Although it is highly dangerous to do so, it is not difficult for RMG workers in the Savar/Ashulia area to mobilise significant numbers of fellow workers.
- Actions spread and escalate in response to violence; a large number of small, peaceful, factory-level forms of resistance are reported to occur. In the majority of instances of industrial disputes, workers and managers, sometimes involving owners, negotiate settlements quickly and quietly.
- There is very limited evidence of actors external to the sector becoming involved other than

⁷ OMS is a national scheme selling rationed subsidised grains in urban areas (usually 5kg per person / household per day) with the aim of stabilising grain prices and ensuring affordable access. The programme is self-targeting because the grain quality is often low and travel and queuing time ensures only those who really need it buy the grain. In April 2009, a full year after the international press reported the garments workers' 'food riots', the government, in collaboration with the BGMEA, announced it would be trialling OMS sales in factories; shortly after it announced it reduced the price further in line with dropping market prices (the rice price had fallen steeply by mid-2009). The scheme started in August 2009 but by November, the newspapers were reporting that 'the government's much-expected food-rationing programme for readymade garment workers (RMG) went into hibernation apparently for factory owners' indifference toward it.' The Daily Star, 14 November 2009; 'Food rationing for RMG workers stalled: Hardly 5,000 benefited so far though owners pledged to cover 6.5 lakh initially' <http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=114018> [accessed 23 November 2014]. Equally likely is that the drop in the price of rice at this time pushed demand down, but it is not clear why the scheme was not revived, nor whether there were demands for it to be revived, during the 2011 price spike.

the police and, in a minor way, local leftist groups. Even political parties keep out of these struggles, except, it is said, when their local strongmen are recruited to protect factory owners against protesting workers.

- The repertoire has not evolved far over the decade. Actions appear to start locally and peacefully but escalate to factory-level violence in response to repression or perceived failures by factory owners to act. Other actions with a wider impact intended to reach a higher or larger target than factory owners include efforts to influence public opinion and to negotiate with industry leaders through information campaigns and dialogue. In addition, more recent direct means have been in the form of road blockages.

Also of direct relevance to the present argument is while the protesters and workers who had not participated in protests freely discussed their grievances about the cost of food and other basic subsistence costs (rent being a particular current concern), these were subsidiary to the core purpose of the struggles themselves. These were to realise their rights as workers to a liveable wage, and adherence to basic employment conditions. So while the food crisis featured, it was not the primary object or the substance of their protests.

The Gaibandha 'fair markets' campaign

The Gaibandha 'fair markets' campaign case shares several features with the RMG workers' protests. It is an ongoing struggle between the Committee for the Protection of the Interests of Small Business Owners (KBSS), supported and organised by the local branch of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, and local market leaseholders, relatively affluent and well-connected business owners who enjoy strong party political backing from both of the main parties. The roots of the struggle date back to around 2000, but have largely been over the rightful rents or charges for the use of the marketplace throughout. At times this has featured strong and, at moments, highly effective resistance by the small farmers and vendors who use this large central market, to the illegal tolls or taxes on sales, leasehold arrangements, and other services imposed by the politically powerful leaseholders.

Initial events were spearheaded by the Gaibandha Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) (and leftist allies), and included the 2004 suspension of the Union Parishad chairman on corruption charges. In 2006 the small farmer-traders in the area began to mobilise alongside the CPB, who supported their effort to organise around a protest against a toll or illegal tax on seeds. In 2007 the newly organised KBSS with the CPB managed to organise a demonstration against illegal marketplace charges. The delivery of a petition to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (the chief executive of the sub-district administration, and a very powerful individual) triggered an investigation that, allegedly due to political interference, failed to hold anyone to account.

In 2008, during the caretaker government and at the peak of the first price spike, the KBSS again with CPB support bid for and won the lease of the market. For the first time in local history, the market was not being run by politically connected business people, but by the small farmers and traders who comprised the majority of the market users. Their management of the market was allegedly a success; there were no complaints of corruption or excess tolls during

the period, and large profits were made and declared in a public meeting at which they were distributed among the cooperative members. Politically connected thugs attacked the meeting, and in the melee, several people were injured. Several members of the KBSS were arrested and some served time in jail (and now face further charges).

This last event took place under the new democratically elected government. Supporters of the ruling party then won the tender for the market lease in 2009. Since 2010, the jailed KBSS participants have been out on bail, but they and their CPB comrades and families face continual threats and ‘psychological warfare’ from activists from the two main parties (whom, it should be noted, have acted in concert against the KBSS and the CPB over this).

The repertoire used here has included *haat hartals*, or strikes of the weekly market, an impressive organisational effort in this agricultural market, which sits at the crossroads of five villages (and is relatively far from any major towns). In addition, there have been demonstrations and marches, petitions, and engagement with high-ranking officials. Some efforts have been made to engage the media on their side, and it is through media reportage that this case came to our attention.

The case is of considerable interest for a number of reasons. For present purposes the profile of the protests differ from the other subsistence protests recorded, primarily in that the far left, in this case the Communist Party of Bangladesh, played an effective and (in the eyes of the small farmers and traders who comprise its supporters) positive role. There is a strong suspicion that many leftist groups have turned from militancy to organised crime (perhaps particularly in the south of the country). However, in this case, their agenda appears to be genuinely supportive of relatively poor and powerless rural people. The research for the case study found that the food price rises were an important part of the context in which their struggles became more acute, but, as with the garments workers, they were not or were not obviously an important trigger. The Gaibandha fair market campaign shares the following features with the other subsistence struggles of the period in:

- avoiding engagement with national party politics, and viewing political corruption as a key part of the problems they face;
- articulating a clear moral position on the fairness of markets (on which more below);
- connecting the abilities of producers to earn a fair living with that of consumers to pay fair prices;
- expecting an appropriate official response in terms of enforcing rules already in place.
- Also like the RMG workers, the Gaibandha campaign pre- and post-dated the 2007–12 period. It also faced violent repression by actors backed by political power, as well as the judicial and law enforcement arms of the state itself.

3.5 Why and how people protested: moral economies and the politics of provisions

We turn now to a closer look at the nature and content of protests in this period, initially

through an exploration of the ideological or mobilising content of the RMG workers' struggles for wage increases in the Dhaka sub-district of Savar, a byword for industrial activism; and the 'fair markets' campaign in the northern district of Gaibandha, involving small farmers and traders and the Communist party. Our inquiry sought to understand the legitimating notions motivating the protests, including ideas about how markets should operate, and visions of the good life or the social order, as well as diagnoses of market failure and mis-governance. We conceptualised the idea of 'moral economy' as 'ideas about how markets ought to (be made to) work'. We did not translate the concept for our respondents but asked them to describe how food markets worked and were governed; to describe what had been happening in local food markets in recent years, including with respect to price changes and how that was influencing change in their own lives; and to discuss how the governance of markets should be achieved. In both cases, conditions in retail food markets provided activating context for the protests, but they were not the central grievance in either: the struggle was for fair wages (in a context of rapid consumer cost increases driven by commodity price rises, understood to be partly the result of political corruption and weak governance) or for fair markets (in a context of rapid consumer and producer cost increases, again causally linked to corruption and weak governance).

The ideas underpinning these struggles are cast in a moral idiom, but the specific issues in contention are firmly part of a distinctively Bangladeshi politics of provisions. The arc of the narrative they describe tends to contrast how markets (in food, agricultural inputs and to a certain extent, labour) operate against an understanding of people's entitlements; these entitlements are in turn founded in an understanding of the social order or 'the good life' (of how society should be organised).

Fair price / value / fair wages

At the heart of the ideology being expressed through these protests is a concept of 'fair value'; the concept is similar to 'fair price' and can be directly translated so). The concept was applied both to the prices earned by producers of food but also to the prices charged to consumers. In one focus group discussion of male workers in the EPZ, an equivalent concept of a 'fair wage' was also applied to refer to the rightful returns to labour, and the ideas of a 'fair lease' (rent, perhaps?) and of 'fair entitlements' were also used. It should be noted that the concept was most often used by the Communist Party activists, members and their supporters in rural Gaibandha; it was plainly a term they used with great ease. However, the urban RMG activists, factory workers who did not identify as politically active, shopkeepers, market stallholders and small traders also used similar concepts. That is, although the politically active left was most prominent in the use of the specific term, it was clearly present in the discourse of other politically aware (if not leftist activist) groups. The sense of the term also features among some progressive civil society groups and thinktanks such as the Centre for Policy Dialogue.⁸

⁸ In 2013, the Centre for Policy Dialogue shared results from research on what the minimum wage for readymade garments workers should be according to International Labour Organization standards. They conclude that BDT8,200 would be the correct level, and that as an interim measure it could be set at 80 per cent, or BDT6,500 (Moazzem and Raz 2014). These figures are above the current minimum wage, which as of December 2013 was set for the lowest grade of machine operator at BDT5,300 (including basic pay and all allowances). It should be noted that CPD is the leading thinktank and research institute in Bangladesh, and widely considered both technically credible as well as engaged with policy processes and debates. So these 'living wage' estimates have been treated with respect.

Both rural and urban people spoke of farm-gate prices as wrong, unfair or inadequate because of:

- rising input costs, particularly the cost of fertiliser, which meant farmers did not earn the right return on their hard work in the fields, as the prices producers received did not reflect rising input costs; and/or
- the role of market intermediaries, and their manipulation of the timing of market transactions. This manipulation meant farmers were forced to sell to traders at moments when prices were at their lowest, in order to repay pressing debts (sometimes owed to the same people).

OI, a 46-year-old farmer and local CPB functionary explained that:

The main point is that here farmers don't get fair value. When we plant our rice crop then it's BDT500 per maund⁹ and at selling time we get BDT450. Now [X months later – the height of what used to be the hungry season] it is BDT850. When we farmers are selling our dhan [unprocessed rice crop] we are selling it all off at BDT450. We have to pay our field labourers, pay for fertiliser, pay for oil [fuel for irrigation].

OI also described an incident that had occurred to one of his comrades: he had gone to Dariyapur bazaar to sell 20kg of paddy to cover household expenses. But of the 20 or so wholesalers in the bazaar, not one would buy his grain, presumably because of unfair trade agreements among the market lease-holders designed to keep farm-gate prices low. OI concluded: 'The ordinary folk are not getting fair value/price. Farmers are losing their land [as a result].' In this way, the season-by-season failure to achieve a reasonable return or fair price becomes part of a larger pattern of exploitation in which a process of landlessness is accelerated.

The idea of a fair price for consumers was less clearly articulated, but it had a ready referent in the form of fair price outlets – shops selling publicly subsidised grains.¹⁰ Because the government buys and sells food in such a way to influence food prices on behalf of its citizens establishes the idea that it can and should set a fixed price or control prices that people can afford to pay. Among the many responsibilities of government with regard to food policy, price controls were widely agreed upon. In discussion it emerged that this most often meant literal controls on retail prices with official prices published on a board in the market place. This would protect both the consumer and the small trader from sudden price hikes and illegal taxes. Faith in the power of official signage to create transparency around prices seemed strong both in the rural and the urban area. This was particularly important to traders in the Dariyapur bazaar, and was seen as of key importance to the small traders and farmers who sell their produce there. BM, an 80-year-old seller of limes in the Dariyapur bazaar, supported the need for a chart specifying wholesale and retail prices with official tax rates on each item, adding

⁹ An Asian unit of weight, approximately 37kg.

¹⁰ This is now chiefly the OMS system described above. However, when in effective power during the 2007–8 CTG, the army established a set of separate outlets to reach the poor. Older respondents (anyone over 40) will recall the Public Food Distribution system, comprising rations for civil servants and other urban population groups and the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh outlets. Most of this system favoured the urban middle classes, most famously and tragically during the 1974 famine. As part of the public sector reforms of the early 1990s, the BNP government that took power in the first multi-party elections, phased most of these out as part of broader food system reforms, replacing them to some extent with food- and later cash-transfer schemes targeted to the rural poor. Several of the contributions in Ahmed, Haggblade and Chowdhury (2000) describe this period in some detail.

in outrage, 'A poor *public* [a member of the public] goes to sell their goods and they take an additional 2 *taka* tax!'

A few workers used the term 'fair wage' but a broader concept to which it seemed to refer – a wage that afforded a decent living standard including scope to invest in the future – was also articulated. MH, a married 40-year-old textile dying factory worker based in the EPZ in Savar, explained that: 'Now the ongoing movement (*andolon*) is for fair wages. If government were to give those fair wages we would see that everywhere people could meet their needs.'

The idea of a fair price or a fair wage refers to a social order in which people are able to manage their needs to a reasonable standard of living. People referred frequently to the kinds of foods they were unable to afford now which in the past they had eaten (or thought they should be able to eat). This was partly about affording the basics, and some people referred to nutritional needs in various ways. But it was also about culturally preferred foods: a small food trader in the EPZ in Savar noted for instance, that in this month of Ramadan he was unable to buy dates, which are a relatively luxurious imported item, but it is customary to break the fast with a date, forging a connection to the Middle Eastern origins of Islam. In Savar, it was common for RMG workers to talk about how rising living costs made it difficult for them to remit money to their families in the village – to do so is not only a source of pride but also an important source of support for ageing parents, expected of men in particular. Also important to the quality of life is the quality of food people eat: people spoke about not feeling confident that the food they can afford to buy is safe, in a context of widespread fears of adulterated food.

By referring to ideas about the quality of life that needs to be enabled through the food system, these moral economy ideas link to a specific set of understandings of the social order. These illustrate some of the specifically Bangladeshi quality of the politics of provisions. This is revealed first in the sense that those who break the moral rules of the food system tend to be outsiders to the moral community. This was articulated in various ways, but in the rural community in Gaibandha there was a sense that exploitative market intermediaries were often outsiders – newcomers to the area or people who live outside the local community, or were from non-farming backgrounds. For the RMG workers, they were themselves the outsiders, even when they had lived in the industrial zone for many years. In effect, they lacked strong moral ties to market traders, and their relationships were purely those of market transactions.

This suspicion of outsiders connects to a wider Bangladeshi suspicion of commerce and trade linked to the historical association of economic exploitation with non-Bengali or non-Bengali Muslim backgrounds. This is not unusual in post-colonial nations, but it is particularly noticeable in Bangladesh. Part of the nationalist struggle here was a struggle against exploitation by outsiders (particularly in relation to land, agriculture and food systems); membership of the national moral community continues to be linked to matters of ethnicity and social origins. This is why when contemporary protests are framed in terms of exploitation by outsiders, there are echoes of the protracted three-staged nationalist political struggle – first against the British, second against the Hindu landowning classes of East Bengal, and finally against (West) Pakistan (N. Hossain 2005). The ironies of contemporary exploitation, given the sacrifices of

the nationalist struggle, were highlighted by a 40-year-old male factory worker:

So, they who are working are dying from starvation, and those who are not working, they are making crores of taka¹¹ becoming factory owners. It would have been better not to be citizens in this free country but to have stayed living in Pakistan.

The social order is also underpinned by an understanding of the moral community as connecting the interests of rural and urban people. This had some unexpected consequences. While RMG workers are excluded from the moral community of their urban locations, both they and the rural farmers and traders presented their own concerns as consumers (purchasers) of food as directly and causally connected to the interests of producers and small traders. There is no sense of opposed interests: a conventional policy analytical framework in which the interests of urban consumers are contrasted with rural producers fails to make sense of the relationships embedded in the moral economy here. Urban industrial workers spoke knowledgeably and sympathetically about the concerns of farmers and indeed small traders; the idea of a fair price for consumers was not antithetical to the idea of a fair price for producers, but was part of the same moral economic principle. The perceived continuity between rural and urban interests in relation to the food economy makes sense both symbolically – a rural farming life continues to be seen as morally superior to urban life and occupations – and also in the lived experience of many urban people, particularly recent migrants from rural areas like many RMG workers.¹² Many RMG workers continue to depend on or support farming activities in their home districts; for knitwear workers this can be particularly important as their contracts are typically seasonal. There is a degree of fluidity and mobility in the movement between rural and urban life and occupations that reflects the recent rapid nature of economic development in Bangladesh. It also reflects its geography and the lack of significant social differentiation that in other countries bar movement between regions or occupations.

Responsibilities of the state

In the ideas expressed by these people about how markets should operate, the state is assigned a key role in assuring that people can afford to achieve the quality of life essential to their wellbeing. The state has a role at several different levels, but the role is prescribed within the realm of what people believe to be politically feasible. The state is held responsible for basic regulatory as well as protective functions, including:

- protecting consumers against sudden undue price rises resulting from collusive market practices, through for instance, enforcing marketplace regulations on transparency about prices and taxation;
- ensuring access to food through fair price shops and social protection schemes;

¹¹ A crore is 10 million; crores of taka suggests unimaginable amounts of money.

¹² It is no coincidence that many RMG workers in the Savar area are themselves from the northern regions, including Gaibandha district. This reflects the historically high levels of chronic and seasonal hunger in those regions. In other more prosperous parts of the country (the east in particular) international labour migration is more common. For the poorer and less well-networked northerners, migration to Dhaka for garments work appears to have been more feasible. Our sample of interviewed RMG workers comprised a significant proportion of people claiming origins in the greater Rangpur region.

- regulating market intermediaries so that producers achieve farm-gate prices that reflect costs of production, and are not exploited through unfair financing arrangements;
- supporting producers through subsidised agricultural inputs or protection against commodity price spikes;
- protecting workers against exploitation by factory owners – failure to pay legal wages and benefits and other labour rights.

While the state is assigned such responsibilities, a specifically Bangladeshi aspect of the politics of provisions is the lack of faith in the state's capacity to deliver. This lack of faith is rooted in the sense that political corruption shapes most aspects of economic governance:

- at national level: party and patronage politics are seen to enable food grain cartels;
- in industry: partisan control of police and party *mastaans*, or gangsters, are connected to efforts to break industrial action;
- in local markets: party membership is connected to lease-holding, and to support from local government in attacks on fair markets movement activists including use of violence and legal cases against CPB and KBSS activists.

The control by ruling parties and their national organisational structures marks the politics of provisions in this context, and gives a specific form to the ideological motivations underlying these struggles. In this sense, the politics of provisions are an attempt to craft a politics that is beyond and above party politics, in a context in which the party is increasingly all-encompassing in both political and economic life and governance.

Summary: The politics of provisions in Bangladesh, 2007–12

This extended analysis of the subsistence protests seen in Bangladesh during 2007–12 has examined their numbers, motives, organisational means and repertoires. We have established that protests relating to subsistence were few in number, compared to the scale and prevalence of contentious politics in Bangladesh, and the likely severity of the impact of sharp food price rises. Through our case studies we have been able to examine at close quarters the organisational strategies and thinking behind such action. We conclude that the evidence supports the assumption that the small numbers of protests were by groups who were particularly hard hit by the food price rises because of how their occupation exposed them to price volatilities (of agricultural inputs and consumer prices). These groups had clear ideas about their subsistence rights, and about the responsibilities of official actors. In many cases, they had clear ideas about who should act, and what they should do. That there were some strong areas of consensus on these issues indicates that these are more widely shared within the Bangladeshi moral community.

However, the groups who protested also all had opportunities to organise, because of their workplace locations and/or because they were already organised by the time of the food price spikes. Indeed, the specific triggers for their action during this time were relevant matters, such

as corruption or abuse of workers' rights, which were deemed particularly outrageous at a time when living costs were climbing. Arguably, the peak in food prices was the moment at which an already simmering anger came to the boil.

It is also clear from the profile of protests from the political events catalogue and from those described in our case studies that protesters are demanding action – not only from central government, but also from local authorities (market and factory officials, for instance). They have a certain level of expectation that makes their protests rational: these are not spontaneous acts of untargeted anger, but pointed statements of need and rights.

The conclusion we draw from this analysis is that a smaller number of protests took place than we would expect given the extent of need, but that these groups were able to organise, had clear rationales for doing so, and expected action in response. In other words, this has the appearance of a functioning politics of provisions, in that people facing subsistence crises are able to make their claims in the expectation that they will elicit a response. We look next at the nature of the policy and political response to the price spike.

4. POLICY AND POLITICAL RESPONSES

This section discusses the policy and political responses to the food price volatility of 2007–12, focusing on the reactions and policy changes in light of the 2008 food crisis. We look first at the policy context, then at how policies get made in Bangladesh, and finally at how food policy changed during this period.

4.1 Relevant political context of the 2008 price spike

In the first two years of the research period, 2007 and 2008, during the first major food price spike to be experienced since the 1970s, Bangladesh was ruled by an unelected military-backed caretaker government (CTG - January 2007 to December 2008). This had some constitutional basis in the provision for a caretaker administration to oversee elections, but had been extended in 2007–8 with the backing of the international community on the grounds that political corruption had reached such an intolerable level that free and fair elections could not be achieved without a period of governance reform (IGS 2008; BRAC University and Institute of Governance Studies 2009). Overlapping almost perfectly with this period of unelected rule was the 2008 food price spike, so that the unelected military-backed administration was tasked with tackling an unprecedentedly rapid rise in the price of staple food grains of rice and wheat (the latter less important to the food economy but relied on by poorer people in particular (see Figure 1)).

One feature of the 2007–8 period was the clampdown on political protest under national emergency conditions. This was chiefly targeted at organised party actions, but officially all demonstrations were prohibited. Nevertheless, as Section 3 documented, a small number of protests and demonstrations related to food and the cost of living did take place during this period, and up to 2012. Arguably, on close inspection, none of these were ‘food riots’ in any accepted sense of the term; however, the international media fingered Bangladesh as one of the countries in which food riots had occurred in the wave of such events said to have occurred in low-income countries in 2008. The dominant form of protest in the entire period 2007–12 was sporadic yet numerous RMG factory worker protests for wage rises and benefits. In the early part of this period, when food prices were rising fast and particularly sharply, these protests were directly connected to food prices, with protest slogans including ‘*dam komau, jan bachao*’ (‘*lower prices, save our lives*’). Later, as rising and high food prices became routine (and perhaps for other reasons), the grievances and demands were framed more specifically around wages and benefits. A small number of other protests also occurred, chiefly led by the welfare associations and unions of the small industrial working class, and more notably low skilled and low paid public sector workers, all urban.

The key significance about the Bangladesh case is the surprising lack of food-related protest during this period. Nor does this mark a difference with past popular responses to hunger: in

the past, historians and political sociologists have raised questions about the lack of hunger-related protest, and extended academic debates have taken place about whether the best explanations are cultural (as in Greenough 1982) or reflect a lack of political opportunity (despite the moral economy motivations to protest, in line with Bohstedt 2010). In contemporary Bangladesh there are a number of factors that would presuppose food riots during price spikes. Yet the protests which were triggered by food price rises were few in number considering: a) the large proportion of the population exposed to hunger; b) the live tradition of political protest in Bangladesh; and c) the potential for political capital to be gained from organising around food in a society whose collective memory of famine is still raw and visceral.

At the same time, and despite the wealth of development NGOs and civil society groups, there was no large-scale civil society organising and no significant right to food movement. This is also despite the tendency to mimic Indian social policy (e.g. right to information, employment guarantee scheme). There is in fact no significant rights-based movement around social and economic rights at all in Bangladesh.

This may reflect the fact that the country is seen as a food security policy success story – nutrition levels are not impressive but are comparable to elsewhere in South Asia and they have improved relatively fast; episodes of acute food insecurity are now rare, particularly since the past decade; the food security system is seen by policymakers to be good partly because it has mixed a responsive food security infrastructure (programmes that automatically kick in when needed) with a market-friendly overall approach to public food stocks management. Food security policymaking is both a highly political matter and deeply technocratic. It is striking that several key politicians and CTG administrators during this period (the Ministers of Food and Home Affairs under the elected Awami League government from 2009 and the Adviser/Minister of Trade and Commerce in the CTG) were themselves acknowledged as scholarly experts on hunger, nutrition and social protection.

Yet Bangladesh is a net food grain importer, and was severely impacted by the 2008 price spike because of India's rice export ban. Regional relationships – and now relationships further afield with ASEAN countries – are important for Bangladesh's food security. Nevertheless, the food crises of 2008 and 2010–11 re-invigorated drives for food grain self-sufficiency. The CTG administration had been wrong-footed by the 2008 price spike: unprepared with public food stocks, unable to secure imports fast enough in the global market because of the protectionist responses of other rice-growing countries protecting their own domestic markets, prices rose sharply and severely. The OMS system for selling cheap grains to subsidise consumption and stabilise prices was inadequate for the scale of the event. The non-political character of the CTG administration was popularly seen as part of the problem, as it was believed that an elected government would have been more responsive because of its electoral pressures. By the time the Awami League-led government took elected office in 2009, prices were coming down in the global and national markets; imports had arrived, and the following harvests were successful. By the time of the 2010–11 price spikes, the government had extended the OMS and other new social protection schemes were rolled out for the rural poor. Food prices mostly continued to rise through the period, but no further major spikes (other than seasonal ones)

occurred.

We turn now to analysis of the policy context, policymaking process, and food policy changes that emerged during the 2007–12 period.

4.2 The policy context and process

Article 15(2) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh states that ensuring food security is one of the fundamental responsibilities of the state. Since independence, successive governments of Bangladesh have attempted to meet this mandate. In the early post-independence years, this responsibility was interpreted as direct intervention in the food market, with the government a primary actor. However, as the National Food Policy observes,

Food scenario in Bangladesh has undergone major changes over the last decade, moving from a system involving large-scale government interventions in rice and wheat markets to a more market-oriented system, with public food distribution system increasingly targeted to those households which are mostly in need. (GoB 2006: 3)

In fact, over the decade prior to the 2008 food crisis, the government had liberalised the grain trade, created opportunities for private sector actors to import food products and build storage, and dismantled the public food rationing system. In fact,

Instead of using public distribution as an outlet for public food procurement and price support, the emphasis has shifted toward strengthening social safety nets and disaster mitigation programs, and procurement and stocking are now being carried out up to the level necessary to sustain those programs. (IFPRI 2005: 35)

Bangladesh's Food Policy in 1988 emphasised ensuring food security. However, in 2006, that policy document was revised significantly and food security was redefined as the scenario

...when all people at all times have availability of and access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active, healthy and productive life. (GoB 2006: 2)

This particular definition is important as it identifies availability, access and utilisation (i.e. the food products will fulfil the dietary and nutritional need of the citizens) as key elements. This means it is not enough that food grain production or prices are set at defined levels, but that all people should be able to access and make use of them to meet their food needs. Government is supposed to take necessary steps to ensure an 'efficient and sustainable increase' in food production, to achieve which it will supply the necessary agricultural inputs to the farmers at an 'acceptable price'. At the same time, the government is also to take steps to ensure agricultural diversification and use of modern agricultural technology. In this way, the government considers

increased food production a key step for ensuring food security, acknowledging the significance of the role of farmers.

The government is no longer the only or indeed key actor in the food market, and the role of the private sector is also acknowledged in the provision of 'adequate incentives for private food marketing, processing sorting and stock maintenance' (GoB: 6). In terms of ensuring adequate food supplies, the public and the private sector will work together:

Government will develop market infrastructure so that farmers can sell food grains at a reasonable price by

- opening procurement centres to purchase food grains '...at a price high enough to cover cost of production with adequate profit for the farmers, but not so high as to encourage rent-seeking behavior' (GoB 2006: 7);
- encouraging private sector market infrastructure from which government can procure and widen opportunities for farmers.

Procured food will

- be made available to the poor through different safety net programmes and
- (when necessary) be sold at a cheap rate through the OMS and fair price market;
- be held in stock food and supplied to the market in times of crisis, to help stabilise high prices or to increase the supply under conditions of scarcity. The government will always aim to maintain stocks, and may import food products from other countries to prepare for food crises.

Private sector businesses can supply food grains either by selling to government (buying from domestic farmers or through imports), or they can sell in the open market.

This summary of the food supply mechanism in the National Food Policy of 2006 indicates that the government's mode of operation in the food market has liberalised considerably in the past decades. Below we look at how the government receives information regarding food stocks and flows (scarcity, prices and access); what action this triggers; and how successfully it implements its policies, with specific reference to the 2007–12 period.

Policy process

The 1974 famine and its political consequences made it clear to the political parties and their leaders that acute crisis in regard to supply of food products should never be ignored. As described below, events associated with 1974 famine forced the political actors to constantly scan the political environment to get a sense of the existing food supply scenario and react accordingly. Whereas in most policy domains, the government of Bangladesh had been slow to react, the food policy domain presents a different scenario, where the possibility of crisis or early crisis has always resulted in quick policy changes. Therefore, before moving to the discussion about how the policy arena reacts to the food crisis that existed in the country between 2007–12, it is necessary to briefly discuss the 1974 famine.

The 1974 famine

Several key informants pointed out the significance of the 1974 famine in dictating the terms of the food policy of Bangladesh. As one interviewee commented,

The 1974 famine changed the politics around food. Food was the reason for changing political context, not BAKSAL¹³. Right to food and right to vote were merged together.¹⁴

Successive governments learned from this early experience and they knew that a famine or a famine like situation would definitely bring an end to their rule. As another interviewee said, '1974 is always in the mind of the Government. Government would stop famine by all measures'.¹⁵ Our interviews indicate that the memory of the 1974 famine not only forced the government to put in place a rapid response to crises, but also to change policies rapidly. One food policy expert pointed out that after the 1998 flood, Bangladesh faced a difficult challenge:

BBC predicted that 1 million people would die of starvation due to shortage of food created by the flood. [At that time, only the government could import food from the international market. To deal with this crisis...] a big policy change happened as the government opened up import by private sector. [The BBC's prediction] did not happen due to government's policy change. When government imports, it takes six to seven months, but the private sector can import very quickly.¹⁶

The enduring effect of the 1974 famine in the policy domain was mentioned in several interviews, and appears to be taken for granted as part of the unspoken backdrop to contemporary policy decisions. Some discussion of the effects of the famine, in which around 1.5 million people died and which presaged a period of intense political turmoil, is in order given the focus of the present study.

While chronic hunger and malnutrition are major development concerns in Bangladesh, they lack the political urgency of acute hunger or food insecurity. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the avoidance of famine – or mass acute hunger – is a greater priority for the Bangladeshi elite than for the political classes of other low-income countries.¹⁷ The importance of averting famine mainly stems from the political significance of protection against subsistence crises.

The 1974 famine occurred during a period of global economic volatility, in the aftermath of the liberation war with the devastation and displacement that had entailed, and in a period of increasing concentration of power within a single party system (BAKSAL). It is an open

¹³ Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) was the one party formation established in 1975 through a short-lived constitutional amendment. The amendment was reversed after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, the nationalist leader and Prime Minister, in August 1975. In contemporary Bangladesh, BAKSAL is often used to refer to a perceived increase in the centralization of rule.

¹⁴ Zakir Hossain, a civil society right to food activist, 7 July 2013.

¹⁵ Key informant interview (KII) with Akhter Ahmed, 31 October 2013, 9:30-11:30 am.

¹⁶ KII with Akhter Ahmed, 31 October 2013.

¹⁷ One of the authors has made this point at some length elsewhere. See N. Hossain (2005).

secret that the nationalist hero Sheikh Mujib lost popularity and legitimacy as a result of the 1974 famine and its associated upheavals. During our interviews and focus group discussions, memories of 1974 were quite often invoked, usually to explain the current existence of policies designed to protect against food price rises.¹⁸ That this was, in essence, a political bungle also seems widely accepted, even though part of the bungle involved the failure of the government of the period to appease the USA, key sources of food aid and longstanding foes of the Mujib government. The issues continue to be debated, with one recent argument that the 1974 famine was in effect the result of a war-ravaged state-controlled economy in the hands of

an essentially inept and corrupt political regime and an essentially indifferent ruling class. After all, the ruling class did not give up its official entitlements of subsidised food while droves of their fellow countrymen were starving to death. (Dowlah 2006: 354)

Note in particular the claims of ineptitude, corruption and indifference, which appear to dominate contemporary recollections of the terrible event.¹⁹ One of the unusual features of Bangladesh's political economy of famine is that the political classes themselves include many scholars and experts on these and related topics. For example, the world's leading authority on the 1974 famine, the economist M. K. Alamgir, is himself a member of the Bangladeshi political elite, having held cabinet positions as minister for planning and home affairs in two Awami League administrations.²⁰ Nor is M. K. Alamgir the only member of the political elite with professional and scholarly expertise in food security matters. The minister for food and the adviser on trade to the caretaker government in 2007–8, as well as some top-ranking civil servants in relevant departments are acknowledged experts or scholars on issues of food security, social protection and local governance. This combination of political power with technocratic capacity makes the food sector unusually well equipped to detect and respond to major episodes of acute food insecurity. At the very least, these are unlikely to go unnoticed by the political elite.

The 1974 famine has shaped the food policy domain in a definitive way – at one end, the political actors have always been quick to respond to any sign of crisis, and at the other, it created a critical knowledge-base in the bureaucratic organ of the country. As we will discuss in the next section, in a centralised policymaking structure, these two factors (i.e. quick response by the political actors and availability of expertise in policymaking), play a critical role in subverting major crisis.

The impact of the policymaking process on policy outcomes

Due to the absence of pluralist politics, the significance of donors in agenda-setting, and the highly centralised decision-making procedure, some scholars have argued that conventional

¹⁸ The entire institutional architecture of the food policy regime is understood to rest on the lessons of famine – e.g. a book about Bangladesh's food security policies successes is entitled *Out of the Shadow of Famine* (Ahmed, Haggblade and Chowdhury 2000).

¹⁹ The researchers noted that among the lingering impressions of the 1974 famine was one of a sense of middle class guilt, as many people with whom we spoke both formally during the research and informally, in relation to it, acknowledged that poor people starved while food reserves went to urban groups. That this event occurred in the immediate aftermath of the nationalist struggle with its strong sense of cross-class national unity might help to explain the potency of the memory of the 1974 famine, and the strength of the sense of 'never again'.

²⁰ Although the effects of 1974 for the popularity of the incumbent party in government, the Awami League, are not documented, it is clear that corruption and bad policies both played a significant role. But so too did the policies of the international community, in particular the USA, whose PL480 food aid laws required the USA to withhold food aid because Bangladesh had been trading with Cuba, a communist government. See N. Islam 2003; Sobhan 1979; Sen 1980; McHenry and Bird 1977. The authoritative account of 1974 remains M. Alamgir (1980).

methods and/or models to explain policymaking processes are inapplicable to Bangladesh (see Osman 2004). Certain policy areas in Bangladesh have opened up in recent years (e.g. environment, real estate), but the food policy realm remains the closed domain of experts and bureaucrats. Given the political and policy importance of food, why is this case, and how does it affect the effectiveness of policy?

Drawing on the policy model developed by Conlan, Posner and Beam (2014), we argue that policy advocates aim to build support for their proposals, along two dimensions: a) the scope and scale of mobilisation (i.e. whether the policy advocates aim to limit access to the policy process to specialised groups or to facilitate access for the wider public or other actors); and b) forms of mobilisation, (i.e. whether the policy advocates rely on organised interest or ideas to push forward their policy proposals). Policies come to the policy table through four 'pathways of power': pluralist, partisan, symbolic and expert (Posner, Conlan and Beam 2002: 8-9) (see Table 3).

Table 3 The Pathways Model of the policy process

Scope of mobilisation	Specialised	Mass
Form of mobilisation		
Ideational	Expert	Symbolic
Interest	Pluralist	Partisan

Source: adapted from Posner et al. 2002

Each pathway operates most successfully in particular environments, with particular kinds of decision-making, coalition-building, with characteristic results, appealing to specific actors who prefer to move issues onto the pathway in which they expect to achieve the best result (Conlan and Beam 2000: 15). The pluralist and partisan pathways reflect traditional models of incrementalism and presidential styles of leadership. In the expert pathway, policy experts play a pivotal role and the scope of mobilisation remains highly specialised. Similarly, the symbolic pathway emphasises ideas, although these ideas may be quite different in nature and mostly simple, evocative and emotional (Posner *et al.* 2002; Conlan and Beam 2000; Posner 2006).

Applied to food policy in Bangladesh, it is clear that policymaking has moved between expert and symbolic pathways. The expert pathway was dominant after the 1974 famine, with successive governments relying on bureaucratic and external expertise (such as the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)) in developing the basic policy framework. Learning from the mistakes of the 1974 famine, policies were developed based on ideas and at the same time, access to the policy domain was restricted – 'politics as usual' had no place in the food policy domain. Our interviews also highlighted an important contradiction to this model. In times of crisis, i.e. when food stocks were low, the democratic regime shifted quickly from the expert pathway to the symbolic one. During such moments, the government typically avoided identifying the underlying causes of such crises and focused instead on importing food as a matter of priority:

[T]he Prime Minister has always been cautious about the food price scenario.

If there is a hint of crisis, the government quickly issues directives that would allow us to buy food grains from other countries. At the same time, we have signed G2G (government to government purchase) [agreements] with a number of countries, which allows us to buy food grains at the quickest possible time.²¹

This is undoubtedly a short-term approach which the government mainly takes to deal with imminent crisis and which is also not in line with expert ideas about food policy. But emergency situations force the government into symbolic responses.

The closed nature of the policy domain and its insulation from party politics through reliance on policy expertise has ensured adoption of policies that are technically and scientifically sound. However, the reliance on experts within a closed domain essentially bars farmers or their organisations from accessing the policy realm, so that they cannot influence them or help establish their mandate or standards. For instance, in Gaibandha we found policies to enable farmer access to procurement centres in practice favour those with means of transport and distribution networks, and the means to pay for inputs, while large local business interests control local price structures. If these farmers' organisations had access to policy spaces, their experiences and interests could have contributed to designing or implementing more effective food policies.

The symbolic pathway is followed mainly during crises and is not a regular policy solution. However, longer-term solutions to issues like food price spikes are rarely sought, because instant fixes with symbolic value are preferred for political reasons. These quick responses offer temporary solutions, but do not succeed in tackling the vested interests that are believed to exacerbate or benefit from scarcity, price volatility or other food crises.

Policy implementation and political responses

A successful food policy includes having an adequate supply of food and a successful food distribution policy, including adequate safety nets for those who are unable to access food through the market or their personal and social entitlements. Key concerns vis-à-vis food policy include the adequacy and timeliness of information about food insecurity (who is hungry, where). Some of our informants suggested that to a significant degree, media reports are relied on for triggering policy action; this is despite the existence of good quality wholesale and retail price data and regular market analyses. This highlights again the priority of symbolic politics over the technocratic expert information, and helps to explain why food security policy is often seen to be more visibly reactive than it is proactive. A second key concern is provision of affordable agricultural inputs and the ability of the government to ensure food farmers receive a fair price. Our findings support those of other research in suggesting that irrigation fuel and seeds (although not fertiliser) remain a concern, and that there remains a gap between official policy and the reality with respect to procurement pricing. Finally, there are concerns about the capacity of the government to control price manipulation: our findings suggest that 'syndicates' operate in the following way. Rice suppliers work together with international rice importers and some dishonest government officials:

²¹ KII with Md. Nazrul Islam, Sr. Assistant Secretary, Food Division, Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, 24 October 2013; 12:40-1:30 pm.

The ball starts rolling when the government is in need of importing rice from the international market and has to depend on the local agents for that. With the help of the dishonest government officials, these local agents keep track of government's stock and when the government invites tender for rice importation, they submit their tenders. A key condition of winning the tender is if they fail to import rice within the stipulated time, they have to pay a fine of BDT5-7 crore (USD 650,000-900,000). However, what happens is, these local agents intentionally delay the process of rice importation and when there is not adequate rice in the market, the price usually goes high. And the local agents import the rice at this stage with the help of the international suppliers and sell rice at a much higher price. In this way, they make a huge amount of profit even after paying the fine of BDT5-7 crore (USD 650,000-900,000). In effect, they create a false crisis and make profit out of it.²²

Hoarding or syndicates are also facilitated because the government may lack adequate storage for the food stocks it has been purchasing in larger quantities since the period of food price volatility started in 2007. Grain traders with capacity to dry wet paddy and store grains can buy paddy from the farmers at a low price when the government fails to buy from them. This role enables them to act as brokers by forcing the farmers to sell paddy cheaply; after it has been stored for some time it can be supplied to the market. An artificial shortage can be created to enable traders to sell rice at a higher price.

It is interesting to note that even though practices to manipulate the price mechanism are understood by government, action is rarely taken against them. In fact, previous experience shows that price manipulation when joined with other factors such as global price hikes may result in deep crisis. However, even at time of crisis, elected governments usually focus on ameliorating the crisis by increasing supply through rice imports. By contrast, during the 2008 crisis, the unelected caretaker government tried to tackle syndicates and hoarding. Many policy actors believed that unelected governments (of which Bangladesh has had several) are generally slower to respond to food crises, and often fail to prioritise them. In fact, when the food crisis hit in 2007, the then government was successful in identifying the presence of a syndicate that controlled the price and they decided to go after it. The consequence was disastrous – they failed to do so and encouraged the syndicate in furthering the crisis and furthermore, they failed to respond quickly to the needs of the citizen. An interviewee explained the failure of the response:

[In 2007], the government decided to buy rice from the farmers at BDT18/kg. However, in the open market, rice was sold at BDT20/kg. As a result, there was no reason for the farmers to sell rice at a lower price. The street-level bureaucrats quickly identified the issue and asked the government to increase the buying price. But as the then government did not have the electoral accountability to the people, they were late to respond and when they finally increased the price

*to BDT20/kg, in the open market price went up to BDT24/kg. Therefore, the government failed to avert the crisis.*²³

Several interviewees argued that in a democratic government, decisions to deal with food crises are taken quickly – ‘at the end of the day, the politicians know that they will not be able to stay in power if the situation becomes worse. They always keep a sharp eye on the food situation and do not hesitate to take quick decisions’, said one bureaucrat.

Others, particularly experts on global food markets and the international situation, noted that the caretaker government’s hands were tied. One reason its options were limited was that domestic food stocks were low due to policies having changed towards purchasing more food on the international market for price stabilisation interventions – an instance of the kind of open market orientation favoured by the Washington institutions. India’s decision to close its borders to achieve its own symbolic policy change had some effects on pricing in Bangladesh. But the speed with which the spike transmitted from the global to the local markets, and the extent of the increase meant, in the view of some experts, that any administration would have found it hard to address. In the end, the policies put in place by the caretaker government began to show results only when the next political government, the Awami League-led government of 2009–13, took power.

4.3 Policy changes

Our discussion so far indicates that in regard to policy change in the food policy domain, mainly two possible pathways may be followed. First, the long-range policy initiatives reflect a critical mix of political reality (i.e. political actors’ intention to be responsive to food-related crisis) and expert-based knowledge provided by the bureaucracy. Consequently, the policies are developed following an expert-based pathway and the focus here is to develop long-range policy solutions to the existing problems. A centralised policymaking structure eventually creates a centralised implementation framework where government bureaucracy plays the key role in ensuring the supply of food and agricultural inputs. Second, in time of crisis, the policy changes are rapid and arbitrary and such changes are not based on an expert consensus. Dealing with the crisis becomes the major focus and the government often goes for quick solutions while ignoring the potential consequences. The question, therefore, is: can the policy changes that took place in Bangladesh between 2007 and 2012 be explained through these two pathways? In this section, we have tried to answer this question and our starting point is the 2006 food policy.

As explained earlier, the National Food Policy of Bangladesh is a comprehensive document that has been developed by taking expert opinion. Successive governments have worked on this policy since the World Food Summit of 1996 and consequently, have developed a comprehensive food security policy framework (the National Food Policy) and a programming document (the National Food Policy Plan of Action) as well as an investment plan for food security and nutrition (the Bangladesh Country Investment Plan). It is important to note that these major policy documents have two distinctive focuses – on the one hand, the policies are

²³ KII with Dr, Mihir Kanti Majumder, Ex-Secretary, 21 October 2013, 5-6 pm

aimed at bolstering deregulation of the market and strengthening the private sector, and on the other, they also included provisions allowing the government to directly intervene in the market in times of crisis. In other words, the policy documents eventually created opportunities for both expert-based and symbolic interventions. Therefore, it is not surprising that whereas the government processes of market deregulation and liberalisation of trade in agricultural machinery and inputs often follow a gradual process, policy actions aimed at controlling the market, especially at the time of crisis, have been taken rather quickly. The remaining part of this section shows the process of different policy actions taken by the government between 2007 and 2012.

Encouraging the private sector

As indicated earlier, since the mid-1980s, the government has significantly liberalised the food grain market and the current policy document also highlights the significant role of this sector in the food market. In fact, the role played by the private sector was bolstered in 1998 when the then government was trying to deal with the major natural disaster of the floods.

Under the current policy regime, the private sector can import rice from international market to sell to the government and local market, can buy rice or paddy from the farmer and can build storage facilities to stock rice. Whereas some of these measures, if not monitored properly, can manipulate the price structure of the food market, the government has actually showed its intention over time to work closely with the private sector. In fact, to encourage imports and discourage exports during the period of rising prices, the successive government had taken some important trade policy measures. For instance, on 8 March 2007, the government eliminated existing tariffs on the import of rice, wheat and other essential items (crude edible oil, lentils, onion, and chick peas). In addition, commercial importers were no longer required to renew value added tax (VAT) registration on an annual basis. All of these policy initiatives had been taken to encourage the private sector to actively participate in the food market. In fact, as the existing studies point out, the change in policies promoted massive private sector investment in groundwater irrigation that fuelled rapid diffusion of high-yielding rice varieties. The growth in rice production accelerated from 2.2 per cent per year during 1970–90 to 3.4 per cent during 1991–2008 (Hossain and Deb 2010).

Support for agricultural production

In the last few years, the government's proactive policy to boost agricultural production was much more effective, which extended to increased and regular supply of several different inputs: credit, irrigation and fertiliser. In the recent past, The Bangladesh Bank issued a directive to commercial banks to increase disbursement of agricultural credit to meet the working capital needs of small and marginal farmers, particularly targeting areas affected by the floods and the cyclone. Many private sector commercial banks (which did not have their branches in rural areas) channelled agricultural credit through NGOs engaged in micro-credit operations. The disbursement of agricultural credit in the financial year 2007/8 (Taka 61.67 billion / USD 808 million) was 16.51 per cent higher than the total disbursement of agricultural credit in 2006/7 (BDT 52.93 billion / USD 678 million). The government also provided (for the first time) a

subsidy on diesel used in irrigation. It was provided directly to farmers and amounted to Taka 2.5 billion (USD 33 million) in 2007/8. The 20 per cent subsidy for electricity used in irrigation was also continued (Hossain and Deb 2010).

The government also maintained a subsidy on urea fertilisers (implemented at the border) despite the rapid rise in its price on the world market. Indeed, the subsidy on urea increased to nearly 80 per cent of the procurement cost, and due to the very high level of subsidy, the government had to ration distribution of urea fertiliser with the help of public administrators (deputy commissioners, Upazila Nirbahi officers, agriculture officers). As a result, domestic urea prices were relatively stable. In contrast to urea, the prices of triple superphosphate (TSP) and muriate of potash fertiliser increased rapidly because world prices of these commodities increased sharply and all imports go through the private sector. The higher prices had a negative impact on use of non-urea fertilisers (Hossain and Deb 2010).

Social safety net programmes

As mentioned earlier, to ensure food security for the lower-income groups who were hit hard by the price hike, the government undertakes a number of strategies. Known as social safety net programmes (SSNPs), these became a major focus of the government's activities since the 1974 famine. During that time, a number of schemes including the vulnerable group feeding (VGF) and the vulnerable group development (VGD) were developed for the poor. These were mainly public works and food aid programmes. However, in the 1990s the Government began to introduce schemes that addressed risks across the lifecycle, such as school stipend programmes and allowances for the elderly, people with disabilities, and widows (GoB 2013; GoB 2012).

The successive governments in Bangladesh have shown strong commitment to the SSNPs and as a result, budgetary allocation has increased both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP. According to the Bangladesh National Social Protection Strategy (draft version as of 2013),

the allocation for Social Protection Programmes (SPPs) increased from 1.3 per cent of GDP in 1998 to 2.5 per cent in FY2011. Since then, it has stabilised around 2.0 per cent of GDP. Although this level of funding is modest by international standards, when measured against the government's tight budget situation, this represents a substantial commitment, accounting for 12 per cent of total government spending, and reflects the high priority accorded by the Government to this aspect of the social development policy. (GoB 2013: 7-8)

Official data compiled by the Ministry of Finance indicates that there are as many as 95 SSNPs currently operating in the country. In the 2012-13 fiscal year, the government spent BDT231bn which is 2.2 per cent of the total GDP. During the 2007–12 period, the government spent a significant amount of money on the food aid schemes. In response to the protests in the city areas, the scope and function of the OMS programme has increased as reflected in the 2013 budgetary allocation.

The government often introduces new programmes. For instance, during the 2008/9 fiscal year, the government introduced a new programme entitled '100 Days Employment Generation Scheme' with an allocation of BDT 20 billion (USD 260 million) to generate 200 million person-days of employment for the very poor and for marginal farmers in rural areas. The programme targeted severe poverty-stricken areas such as the Monga (seasonally food-insecure), affected areas in the north-west, areas prone to river erosion and Char areas (newly emerged areas in the river bed) (Hossain and Deb 2010).

Government intervention in the food market

As indicated earlier, the direct intervention by the government in the food market includes actions like stocking, selling rice at a cheaper price etc. Since the 1974 famine, successive governments have been cautious about maintaining a stock of food grain. This focus on maintaining a stock of foodgrain strengthened after the crisis facing the country in 2007. The failure of the then caretaker government encouraged the next elected government to maintain a healthy stock of food grain and also to increase their stocking capacity. During our interviews with the government officials, a number focused on this particular aspect. According to them, to ensure food security the government needs to maintain a stock of 3.3 million metric tons of food grains. Even though in the last five years, the government has increased its capacity, it can stock only up to 1.9 million metric tonnes 19 lac metric tonnes; for the rest, they have to depend on the private sector. Maintaining this stock of rice helps the government control food prices especially in times of crisis. For instance, when the price of rice goes up and it becomes difficult for citizens to buy at a reasonable price, the government can either lower the price by ensuring adequate supply or by selling at a cheaper rate to the citizens.

In fact, providing food products at a cheaper price to the lower-income groups who were hard hit by the price hike is a major strategy of the government, achieved through the Public Food Grain Distribution System (PFDS) which comprises several programmes: Essential Priority (EP), Other Priority (OP), Large Employee Industries (LEI), Flour Mills (FM), Open Market Sales (OMS) and Fair Price Card (FPC). Because of limited stocks, the government could increase the total PFDS allocation in 2007–8 by only 6.7 per cent, to 1.56 million tonnes. This amount was too small to have an impact on market prices (Hossain and Deb 2010).

However, it should be noted here that during the 2007–12 period, the government introduced and modified a number of policies to ensure adequate supply of food to the market and to people. These policies include the OMS Policy of 2012, Fair Price Policy 2010 (updated each year up to 2014), and the Internal Food Collection Policy 2010. A brief description of these is provided in the appendix section. The government also allowed the paramilitary force to operate OMS of essential commodities, including rice, at subsidised prices to urban consumers. This was a popular action during the food crisis of 2007. In 2006–7 about 408,000 tonnes of rice were sold through the OMS. As the market stabilised in 2008, the amount sold through OMS dropped to 268,000 tonnes.

Another short-term approach adopted by the recent government to deal with the food crisis is signing the government-to-government (G2G) agreements with different countries. The current

government felt the need to sign these following the 2007 crisis when India refused to provide rice instead of signing an accord with Bangladesh. Under the G2G, Bangladesh can quickly import and buy rice from other countries. This is undoubtedly a short-term approach, which the government mainly takes to deal with imminent crisis.

The government has signed these G2Gs since 2009 and these have been very useful in dealing with crisis. In fact, in 2012, the government signed a G2G with Thailand. The Commerce Minister of Thailand Boonsong Teriyaphirom exchanged a memorandum of understanding on rice exports with Barun Dev Mitra, secretary of the Food Division of Bangladesh, under which Bangladesh was planning to import 300,000 to 400,000 tonnes of rice from Thailand in 2012.²⁴

24 The Nation, 16 March 2012.

5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The research has attempted to show that subsistence protests were relatively rare in Bangladesh in 2007–12 – at least, a reasonable informed observer would have expected more of such action, because of the exposure of the population to the global price spikes and because of the country’s rich tradition of unruly politics and organised civil society action. From our close analysis of those protests that did occur, we learned the following:

- Food price rises, no matter how dramatic, did not produce riots; instead, specific outrages linked to corruption or rights abuses were the triggers, in contexts where rapid cost of living rises were leading to simmering discontent.
- Some groups were particularly acutely exposed to these price rises, as they were unable to: a) benefit from price rises as producers; or b) protect themselves against price rises as urban consumers, dependent on food markets for their survival. Some of these groups were particularly exposed and without recourse to official pay rises or effective upward pressures on wages (such as the RMG workers).
- Occupational and spatial concentration enabled organisation. Groups that protested did not organise just for that purpose, but had prior histories of mobilisation.
- Clear and strong moral economy ideas – about fairness in relation to work and wages, about ‘the good life’ and about state responsibilities to citizens – were articulated as explanations and justification for protests.
- Strikingly, there was no sense of opposition or division between the interests of rural and urban poor people: protesters noted a continuity in their interests, as against the interests of big business people, whether traders in the food business, factory owners or politicians.
- Corruption and the connections with party politics were a major grievance, yet people expected the state to act to protect them nonetheless.

A key conclusion about the RMG protests specifically is that these mark a ‘certification’ of the interests of these citizens and workers (Tilly 2008). That they are predominantly women is significant. Historically and until the recent past, young women have been the responsibility of fathers, husbands, sons and sometimes brothers. Young urban women (and to some extent, young urban men too) have not customarily warranted the direct protection of the state with respect to their subsistence. The 2008 crisis marked a moment in which it was clear that familial protection was no longer available to these groups, and that the ‘patronage’ of employment in garments factories was not enough to provide basic sustenance. Although we lack the space to discuss this in detail here, it seems clear that the garments workers’ protests were about putting the concerns of an entirely new social category on the policy table. Despite much criticism of the violence of their protests, it is undeniable that the garments workers (men and women) are now recognised as an interest group of considerable importance in Bangladesh. Our somewhat impressionistic findings from the research suggest that in the view of the food

policymaking elite, the garments protests were not ‘food riots’, it is nevertheless clear that the needs of low paid urban workers were forcefully and unforgettably laid on the policy table as a result of their protests.

For the Gaibandha smaller farmer/trader committee, it seems clear that this group is waging a campaign that has the wider support of other agricultural smallholders and business people. The Communist Party of Bangladesh appears to have selected a very popular and legitimate campaign to support. However, the strength of the local political party nexus, from several of the bigger parties and both of the behemoth AL and BNP parties, means that without additional support – whether from the national media, civil society groups or NGOs – the KBSS is likely to struggle to achieve its aims. The successful experience of leasing and running the market during the caretaker government period demonstrates the potential for effectiveness and accountability of participatory governance, but it seems unlikely the experiment will be repeated.

The performance of the caretaker government in responding to the 2008 spike is of interest: the popular and to some extent, official, discourse is that democratic governments do far better in making a swift and appropriate response. (Technocrats and researchers perhaps inevitably take a different view of the matter.) We agree in principle, because our research consistently supported this view, that elected governments fear food crises as ways of losing legitimacy. This is true even though chronic under-nutrition and malnutrition appear to lack political bite in the same way. However, we do not feel able to pronounce definitely on whether the caretaker government performed as well as an elected government might have done: the context was deeply challenging, and they responded differently. The combination of their response with the political economy of food prices in Bangladesh may have worsened a bad situation, but it is beyond our capacities to prove this in any rigorous way.

Nevertheless, the Bangladeshi state displayed a sensitivity to food price rises that enabled a response to 2008 that helped manage the 2011 price spike more effectively. In particular, price stabilisation measures were stepped up, access to subsidised food was increased, and social protection was distributed more widely, particularly in rural areas. These conditions, with rising rural and urban wages, mean that of all the issues Bangladeshis needed to protest about, food was not among the most urgent.

ANNEX

Note on the Political Events Catalogue

Muhammad Ashikur Rahman

We basically produced the political event catalogue out of reports published in three newspapers. Among three, Bengali version of *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Ittefaq* were scrutinised and *The Daily Star* was the only English daily to look up events from. According to the methodology developed earlier, we were supposed to look for events searching with key words and alternatively going through newspapers on a date by date basis. In terms of key word search, *The Daily Star* produces results that we could be able to compile and put into the catalogue spread sheet though date by date search would have carried better result meaning more events could have been found. This fact is revealed after *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Ittefaq* were investigated in an alternative way resulting in more relevant results being found. The reason why we had to choose date by date search for these two daily is that Bengali key words fetch random lists of events that we did not require for our subject matter. But this method was more challenging and tedious than the key word based search which was successfully done on *The Daily Star*.

The Daily Ittefaq search was rather challenging as we did not find online archives of the daily for the required period. Therefore we had to go for searching printed version of the newspaper. A team of 12 students from the University of Dhaka helped in this manual searching. At the University of Dhaka, there is a newspaper section where printed versions of almost all dailies and weekly newspapers and magazines have been archived. The team worked there collecting reports along with the dates and page numbers. But unfortunately there was no provision for photocopying the reports. At that point we figured snap shooting would be a good way to accomplish the job. Then we took snapshots of every report along with their tails in other segments of the newspaper.

Date by date search was wearisome as we had to check 7 years' newspaper which means $7 \times 365 = 2555$ dailies from the first page to the last. That was quite a big job and thanks to the team of Dhaka University. *Prothom Alo* was done single-handedly by me but that was online, easily accessible and no photocopy and snapshots were necessary.

Methodology was both challenging and interesting as well. Looking back to the state of food price and movements around the issue with a number of connected issues such as agriculture, fertilizer, cost of living, wage etc. allowed us to analyse and compare what popular mobilisations were like before and how did those shape recent trends of popular mobilisation. We got the opportunity to have a glimpse of the nature of media reporting around food and its price-centered popular movements. We found a volume of news in all three newspapers reporting on different forms of popular mobilisation around food price hike with little bit of difference each

newspaper maintained. In terms of movements around agricultural issues such as farmers' tension over good and sufficient fertilizer, seeds, diesel, subsidy etc. for example, *The Daily Ittefaq*, seemed to give more emphasis than the other two on agricultural issues. This focus on agriculture tells us about the target clients of *the Daily Ittefaq*. If we see historically, Ittefaq is one of the oldest daily of Bangladesh originating in 1953 and having a good coverage all over the country including rural areas where essentially farmers live. During the liberation war Ittefaq played a vital role. Since its origin it had a moral obligation to agriculture and farmers which was reflected in our political event catalogue as well. Therefore, rural people, farmers are still reached by this daily and it talks about their problems and issues more and more.

The Daily Star and *Prothom Alo*, on the other hand, originated way after liberation and their focus was more on urban clients. That may be why popular mobilisation around food price hike, less wage and salary, living cost taking place in urban areas were mostly highlighted in these newspapers. It is not that Ittefaq did not cover urban events as significantly as the other two did, but it seemed to have an additional contemplation on rural areas. Stories of garments workers' mobilisation taking place mostly in urban areas for higher salary came in all newspapers virtually with a similar weight given. The magnitude of violence in garments workers' mobilisation was higher than that of other popular mobilisation which is why all newspapers put most of these stories either on the first page or last page. Language standards, accuracy of information, number of words and column size of reports remained more or less same in all three newspapers. However, reports on popular mobilisations around agricultural issues were mostly placed inside the newspapers.

Newspapers sometimes publish politically motivated reports to retain or break people's confidence over the government. Media in Bangladesh is either directly or ideologically affiliated with political parties. A large part of both print and electronic media is owned by political leaders or by people who explicitly believe in a particular political ideology. This setup of media has an absolute influence on its reporting fashion over any issue. Food availability and price is a major determinant of Bangladesh's government failure or success. So reporting on popular mobilisation around food price hike is a sensitive issue for both government and media itself. Besides, we cannot say media is altogether independent in Bangladesh. So either consciously, for loyalty to the government or unintentionally being forced by some quarter, media reporting has been characterised by biasness and half-truths. Before onion price goes on hike recently, some media reported that onion production had been 18 ton last year. But later from the very Ministry of Agriculture, it was revealed that the production was 6 ton less than it was reported. People knew that there was no deficit in onion production but in practice the picture was different. Once the fact was revealed the price started spiraling. So media always has this purpose of forming and deforming people's perception about food market and price. While reporting protests centering food price, media maintains similar practice. Because, they do not want to put government in an embarrassing situation circulating news that reveals government's failure in controlling food market. On the other hand some media hostile to the government do the reverse. A classic example in this regard may be cited here. In an FGD with journalists of different newspapers, we asked what the role media played during the last *caretaker government* with respect to reporting protests around food price hike. They admittedly confirmed that media exaggerated virtually all food related public gatherings as

sort of protests for food. A queue of people waiting to purchase rice from OMS²⁵ was shown to have agitated for essential goods. There are a number of citations of this kind came out from journalists. However, food market during caretaker government was really at a cross road. Soon after caretaker government takes the power, a large scale storm called *SIDR* swept over the the country. In that year, production of rice remained 22 lac ton less than that of the previous year. Stockpiling of certain items makes the market situation worse. Besides, businessmen were under pressure of government anti-corruption move. Some importers could not import at that period as big spenders were under the magnifying glass of Bangladesh Bank and Anti-corruption Commission. The newly installed government had a research done by CPD²⁶ showing that businessmen and middlemen are responsible for increasing food price. The interim government then started netting businessmen with charge of irregularities and corruption. They also imposed excessive rules and regulations in operating business. This interference of the government in the market had some consequences. In order to avert trouble, nobody wanted to show their money and consequently import virtually halted resulting in rise of essential goods like oil, rice, wheat etc. And all these issues were covered by the media with a bit of hyperbole.

Government is not the only target though of the media to keep happy or to hurt. Syndicates such as business tycoons importing food items play key roles in controlling the food market. These business persons monopolize/stockpile certain imported food items and thus can have influence over news reporting for the sake of their business. So clearly there have been some manipulation and biasness prevalent in the media in terms of reporting around food issues. Media certainly have some positive roles to correct loopholes of government actions over food issues. Government takes strategies to keep their image intact by producing information which is not altogether true. Government also tries to present a scene differently so that it cannot hurt the price structure of foods. In other words they try to misguide consumers or hide information so that their popularity does not get hurt. But media seems omnipresent in Bangladesh trying to discover the reality regardless of their varying ethical positions. A study of BBS²⁷ showed that there is a surplus of 27 lac ton food in Bangladesh. But their calculation was interesting. BBS produced this result subtracting consumption data found by themselves from the production data of BIDS²⁸. The result did not portray the real scenario as either BBS data or BIDS data was wrong. Government was convinced with the finding and a meeting was called in Prime Minister Office to make decisions for exporting rice depending on the research findings which were methodologically incorrect. Media reported the issue immediately. As a result government felt the pressure and was compelled to withdraw the decision of exporting rice. If the export decision was made and executed, price of rice would have doubled at that time. So media played a positive part in that case.

25 Open Market Sale, a government safety net programme selling essential goods like rice, wheat, oil, dal, sugar, onion etc. at price less than the market price. Usually a truck loaded with goods stays in a public place where people maintaining queue purchase goods. Sometimes line gets longer and authority is not able to provide with goods according to the demand which results in eruption of agitation or small protests against the authority.

26 Center for Policy Dialogue, a think tank in Bangladesh

27 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

28 Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies

Major policies introduced during or relevant to the research period

Title	Year	Implementing Ministries/ Agencies	Context	Objective	Main Provisions
The National Food Policy	2006	Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To fill in the limitation of the existing food policy 2. A renewed focus on food security 3. To develop a policy in line with the National Poverty Reduction Strategy 4. International Commitment (Signatory of GATT Uruguay Round, Strong role in World Food Summit, 1996) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adequate and stable supply of safe and nutritious food 2. Increased purchasing power and access to food of the people 3. Adequate nutrition for all individual especially the women and children 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide adequate funding for agricultural research and food production 2. Develop a long term food production plan 3. Ensure efficient use of water resources for agricultural production through developing improved irrigation infrastructure 4. Ensure timely, adequate and balanced pricing and supply of fertilizer and other agricultural inputs 5. Encourage private investment and selective liberalization in the seed sector 6. Increase the use of modern technologies for development of new varieties of crops 7. Emphasize on increased production of non-cereal crops 8. Encourage infrastructural development for creating markets of agricultural goods 9. Provide incentives for private sector food marketing, processing, sorting and stock maintenance 10. Manage private sector food imports and encourage export of food products in times of surplus and excessive supply 11. Development of trade supportive legal and regulatory environment 12. Purchase food grain from the domestic markets through open competitive tenders and/or at a price high enough that would ensure profit for the farmers 13. Allow the government to directly intervene in the market at times of abnormal increase or decrease in the food grain market

Rice Collection and Control Order	2008	Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	This order was promulgated during the time of food crisis that took place in 2008. It replaced the Bengal Rice Mills Control Order of 1943	Allowed the government to directly interfere in the market (as per the Food Policy) to ensure adequate stock and fair price of rice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allowed the government to collect adequate amount of rice from the owner of licensed rice mills 2. Ensured that only the licensed rice mill owners would be able to participate in rice business 3. The owners have to follow the directives of the government while buying, selling or distributing rice 4. The Government can order the rice mill owners to supply specific amount of rice (amount and price determined by the government) and the owners are obligated to follow the government's directives
Fair Price Policy and Orders	2010-2014	Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	Started in 2010 to deal with the food price hike. The orders are updated every year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To ensure that food items are delivered to the poor at a reasonable price 2. Development of a mechanism to identify the poor adversely affected by the existing market system 3. Development of a price monitoring system 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Development of a mechanism to identify and distribute "cards" to the poor people which will allow them to buy food products at a low price. 2. Formation of committees in each division, district and union. This committee will select people eligible for "card" based on set criteria 3. Issuing 22,25,000 cards in total (in 2012) 4. Each cardholder will get 20 kg rice per month. They will pay BDT 24/kg. The government may increase or reduce the price if necessary. However, through a different government order in 2014, the amount and price was changed. Each card holder now get 15 kg rice (at BDT 24/kg) and 5 kg flour (at BDT 22/kg) per month. 5. The process will be monitored by the government food controllers

Internal Food Collection Policy	2010	Directorate General of Food, Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	The policy was promulgated to amend the policy of 2005.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To ensure adequate profit for the farmers 2. To stabilize the food grain market 3. Develop adequate stock to ensure food security 4. Ensure adequate supply to the Public Food Distribution System 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provides a directive that food grains have to be bought directly from the farmers 2. According to this, government will buy food grains at Central Storage Depot (CSD) or Local Storage Depot (LSD) controlled by the food directorate of the Ministry. In case of non-availability of such arrangements, special provisions will be made under the supervision of the Regional Food Controller or District Food Controller 3. "First Come, First Serve" policy will be followed in case of buying rice and wheat. The government will not buy from any businessmen and middlemen. The farmers have to be present. 4. From each farmer, the government will buy between 40/70 kg (minimum) and 3 metric ton of rice. In case of wheat, the amount will be between 50/80 kg and 3 metric ton. 5. Committees will be formed at the National, Divisional, District and Upazila level to monitor the food collection process.
S.R.O. No. 113-Act/2011	2011	Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	This order was promulgated to prevent food hoarding	The main objective of this order was to ensure that the businessmen were not generating crisis by stocking excessive amount of food grains	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unless allowed by the government, no businessmen is permitted to stock more than 1 metric ton food products 2. Specified the amount of food products that can be stocked by the government-licensed businessmen
Open Market Sales Policy	2012	Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	Provided the basic guidelines for the Fair Price Policy and Orders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Development of a guideline to distribute food products through the Public Food Distribution System 2. Control Food Price Hike 3. Stabilize the market 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Points out the eligibility criteria for the dealers participating in the OMS 2. Explains the process of selling food products 3. Describes the process through which the OMS centers can be identified 4. Allowed the Ministry of Food and Disaster Control to exercise complete control in regard to conduct and monitor the OMS

Safe Food Act	2013	Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	The anti-adulteration drive conducted by the government brought the issue of food safety in the forefront. There were concerns about the quality of food products sold in the market and this Act was designed as the first step to address these concerns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To ensure the right of access to safe food 2. To ensure that proper scientific methods are being followed in exporting, importing, preserving and distributing food products 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Formation of National Safe Food Management Advisory Council and National Safe Food Authority (NSFA) 2. The main goal of the NSFA is to help the designated authorities in determining and maintaining the quality of food products 3. Bans the use of harmful chemical elements (including formalin, calcium carbaide) and insecticides 4. Bans the distribution and preservation of adulterated food 5. Bans the distribution of expired food products 6. Emphasizes on proper packaging and labelling of food products
S.R.O. No. 369-Act/2013	2013	Ministry of Labor	In response to the protest of the workers employed in the Garments Sector, the GoB decided to set a minimum wage.	The act was introduced to ensure the minimum wage in the garments sector	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Divides the workers of the garments sectors in two categories- labor and staff. 2. Employees of the labor categories are further divided into 7 groups and their minimum wages are- Grade 1 (Pattern master, Chief Quality Controller etc.)- BDT 13,000 Grade 2 (Mechanic, Cutting Master)- BDT 10, 900 Grade 3 (Sample machinist, Senior Sewing Machine operator etc.)- BDT 6,805 Grade 4 (Sewing, Winding, Knitting Machine Opeators etc.)- BDT 6,420 Grade 5 (Junior Operators etc.)- BDT 6,042 Grade 6 (General Operators)- BDT 5,678 Grade 7 (Assistant Operators, Assistant Cutters etc.)- BDT 5,300 3. Employyes of the Staff categories are further divided into 4 categories and their minimum wages are- Grade 1 (Store-keeper)- BDT 10,200 Grade 2 (Assistant Store-keeper, Cashier etc.)- BDT 8,100 Grade 3 (Typist, Clerks, Time-keepers etc.)- BDT 7,400 Grade 4 (Peon, Cook, Sweeper etc.)- BDT 5,650 4. Determines that a normal workday of the employess will consist of 8 hours 5. They will get a pay raise of 5% each year

National Occupational Health and Safety Policy	Draft	Ministry of Labor		To provide a safe working place for the workers	Still at a draft stage. Does not provide speci
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The methodology for the political events catalogue for the Bangladesh case study

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