

Unraveling Rural Land Conflicts in Bangladesh: Stakeholders, Power Dynamics, and Paths to Resolution

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Abstract - Conflicts over rural land have plagued Bangladesh since its independence. Rural land issues continue to remain unresolved, and violence related to land is still on the rise. The investigation of those engaged in these disputes and the dynamics of their relationships, however, has received very little attention. The current study maps those involved in land conflicts and their relational interplay in the context of rural Bangladesh. The study utilizes qualitative methods of data collection, including KII interviews, focus group discussions, and expert interviews. Through purposive sampling, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions involved a group of relevant stakeholders in land conflicts in the study areas who provided needed information, ideas, and insights on land issues in the area. The study finds that the power structure of the village affects benefit distribution and the resolution of land disputes. Local political leaders and “Matbors” have an impact on how disputes are resolved. Law enforcement authorities are ineffective at resolving violent conflicts, and corrupt land office staff are also of no help, prolonging such conflicts. The study recommends implementing empathy-building workshops, digitizing the land management system, and improving the judicial process to reduce disputes among stakeholders in rural Bangladesh.

Keywords: Farmer, Land, Matbor, Power Structure

I. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts over land use and ownership are one of the most significant challenges that developing countries face today. Colonial vestiges remain in the land administration systems of developing countries on the Indian subcontinent that were based on marginalizing and excluding the locals to meet the growing European demand for raw materials and arable land. Similar to the rest of the subcontinent, the local region of Bangladesh experiences land-related conflicts caused by the same structures that allow loopholes through which domestic and international corporations can readily engage in land-grabbing, often with encouragement and support from central governments (Borras Jr & Franco, 2011). So, it should not come as a surprise that one in every seven Bangladeshi households is involved in a land dispute (Haque, 2018). Nowadays, one of the main causes of serious violence, conflicts, and abuse of law and order is the increasing prevalence of crimes committed by land grabbers, such as harassment, torture, killings, and the rape of women and girls. In addition, there is growing competition for scarce land due to population growth and climate change, as well as increased exploitation of high-value natural resources (Haberl, 2015;

Homer-Dixon, 1991). These factors all contribute to the emergence of new conflicts and prevent the peaceful resolution of old ones. These growing conflicts have also burdened the country’s judicial system. The escalating frequency of land dispute cases constitutes a pressing concern within contemporary context of Bangladesh. These cases cost more than three billion dollars (Tk 24,860 crores) annually. The average case takes nine and a half years to resolve, implying that the 2.5 million (25 lakhs) pending cases will take 27,000 (2.70 crores) years to resolve (Haque, 2018).

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the effects of land conflict on a developing nation like Bangladesh are enormous, little effort has been made to identify the actors that prolong these conflicts or to map the dynamics of such land conflicts. The authorities make almost no effort to find sustainable solutions to this problem. Electronic and social media, the most influential source for attracting people’s attention, devotes very little coverage to land-related issues and its impact on Bangladesh. The issue remains obscure, and there is little motivation in people to be informed about it. Most often, these conflicts do not stay limited to land issues but spread to other sectors of society and give birth to different types of crimes such as gendered violence, corruption, etc. Again, the lack of attention on this area among policy making debates gradually allows this type of conflict to reach the deep roots of the social structure, which may result in enduring structural violence.

Therefore, this study will attempt to address the research area of rural land conflict complexity through effective mapping of the actors of land conflict in rural areas. This study aims to address three key research questions concerning land conflicts in rural areas. Firstly, it seeks to identify the stakeholders involved in such conflicts. Secondly, it aims to explore the dimensions of the relationships among the various actors engaged in land conflicts within rural communities. Lastly, the study investigates the roles played by these actors at different levels in land conflicts. The outcome of this research is hoped to uphold its objective of recognizing how different actors are involved in land conflicts, their role in lengthening and sustaining the impact of such conflicts, and their role in the village political economy. This systematic investigation will also allow

conflict researchers to understand the dynamics between local power structure and rural land conflicts in Bangladesh, as land is the predominant source of this power.

A. Land Issues and Bangladesh

1. Land Availability in Bangladesh: Bangladesh is predominantly agrarian in nature; hence, water and land resources are quite important. All elements necessary to

satisfy basic needs, such as food, raw materials for industrial goods, medicine, etc. are sourced from these lands. However, the 165 million people who live in the country do so in just an area of 14.4 million hectares; per capita land is twenty-five decimals, out of which only fifteen decimals are agricultural (Siddiqui, 2019). Thus, Bangladesh’s dense population massively contributes to the country’s scarcity of land.

TABLE I LAND AVAILABILITY, 2012-2020 (ADOPTED FROM STATISTICAL YEARBOOK BANGLADESH 2021)

Year	Not Available for Cultivation (Thousand Acres)	Culturable Wasteland (Thousand Acres)
2010-2011	9238	542
2011-2012	9265	521
2012-2013	9293	505
2013-2014	9105	483
2014-2015	8942	519
2015-2016	8901	551
2016-2017	8883	575
2017-2018	8841	575
2018-2019	8364	639
2019-2020	8284	671

“Culturable waste land” means any land that has not been cultivated during the last two preceding years and no preparation has been made for its cultivation.

The growing population is accompanied by increasing urbanization and the development of infrastructure, both of which take land away from agricultural use. Consequently, the per capita availability of arable land is experiencing a decline. The aggregate arable land area has diminished, decreasing from 9,238 acres in 2010 to 8,284 acres in 2020. Indigenous peoples make up a substantial portion of Bangladesh’s population and can be found mostly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as in other parts of the country such as Dinajpur, Rajshahi, and Tangail. They are rapidly losing their land because of lack of appropriate documentation and illegal land grabbing. In the year 2000, among the poorest, which accounted for twenty percent of the total population, four out of five possessed less than half an acre of land (World Bank, 2002). This is making it harder to achieve a significant reduction in poverty, especially in rural areas.

2. Land Management in Bangladesh and Built-in Problems: In an agrarian economy like Bangladesh, land serves not just as a means of generating wealth and revenue, but also as a symbol of prestige and social standing. The prevalence of different institutional, political, and cultural variables contributes to the persistence of inherent land-related problems in rural areas, which frequently intensify violence. Cultural considerations, such as inheritance rules, and social factors, such as population growth, serve as built-in challenges in rural property matters.

Bangladesh’s population is increasing annually, but the availability of land stays constant, making it a highly scarce resource. Consequently, the competition for land has escalated (Barkat *et al.*, 2007). Competition of this nature is a primary catalyst for violent episodes related to land disputes. The shortage of land is also influenced by political and social dynamics. Cultivators, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers lack access to land ownership in the areas they labor on due to the growing concentration of land by large organizations (Raihan *et al.*, 2009). This is one of the reason landless people are growing in the country. In addition to that, this landless population comprises of women and orphans. The inheritance law of Bangladesh, where the majority of the population is Muslim, is based on a combination of Sharia law and state law. While Islamic doctrine mandates that women in Muslim households are entitled to a portion of the inheritance, including land, their share is not equivalent to that of their male counterparts. The disproportionate distribution of inheritance typically prevents women from acquiring land, further marginalizing them within Bangladeshi culture.

Structural failures of the land administration system are among the built-in problems. The fundamental functions of Bangladesh’s land administration system can be split into three categories: 1) land management; 2) land survey; and 3) land transfer registration. From the union level to the national level, each of these functions is handled by a distinct category of offices. This system of interconnecting administration in Bangladesh is not well developed and is beset with multiple defects. It is grossly mismanaged, based on age-old or traditional

regulations, and relies mostly on land officers, revenue collectors, and surveyors, which paves the way for corruption. Record of Rights (ROR) or Khatian is not conclusive evidence of ownership, and these merely provide the basis for possession at the recording time. Even the inadequate and improper deed system does not provide conclusive proof of the proprietary right. The lengthy and complex process of ownership determination enhances conflicts. Finally, land services are found to be extremely corruption prone. Corruption in registration offices and tehsil offices increase the suffering of the common people.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Local-Level Land Conflict

The competition for natural resources frequently plays a role in the intra-state conflicts of third-world countries. A study conducted by MercyCrops, an international humanitarian aid organization in Uganda, suggested that competition for land use was one of the underlying reasons for land conflicts in the region. People's utter reliance on land for survival prompted them to resort to conflict in order to stake their claim.

In another study, based on observations of violent land conflicts in South Africa and Zimbabwe, Schweitzer (n.d.) (Schweitzer, 2008) found a correlation between the distribution of land, social perception, political climate, and the level of conflict. These factors mutually reinforce one another, leading to protracted, violent conflict over resources. But in the context of Afghanistan, factors such as population pressure, rapid urbanization, displacement and resettlement, and the rising value of land play the main role in increasing land conflicts. Two decades of protracted conflict that have broken the backbone of the country have also affected the community-based dispute resolution system. Lack of documentation is another important cause of land conflict in Afghanistan, according to Gaston and Dang (2015).

Bukari *et al.*, assessed the gender perspective of land conflicts in Ghana and found that despite measures taken to ensure gender equality in land ownership, women experience more land-related conflicts than men. Land conflicts that women face is mostly related to inheritance, polygamy, and the daily management of land and its produce. The challenges that women are confronted with while claiming their rights are mainly influenced by the power structures that are based on male supremacy (Bayisenge, 2015).

Another potential cause of land-use conflicts can be found in the discourse on the contemporary evolution of rural areas. There is a rising popularity of the countryside among an urbanized population, which might conflict with traditional ideas of rural land use and living. In this context, two examples of land-use conflicts occurring in rural settings can be upheld: conflicts related to the residential environment and outdoor recreation (Mann & Jeanneaux, 2009).

B. Political Economy of Land Conflict

A political economic approach in this context should consider the role of hierarchical forces interacting across spatial scales in creating conditions ripe for land conflict at the local level. For example, the Brazilian government, intending to bring about economic and social development, promoted contradictory strategies that created land scarcity. These strategies led to the expansion of large ranching operations, the creation of conservation units, and the demarcation of indigenous reserves, which constrained the pool of land available for small farmer settlements. Simmons (2004) found that there are significant relationships between land conflict, land concentration, cattle ranching, and road construction. On the other hand, a paired comparison of Dalian and Harbin in China's north-east to link differences in local political economies to land politics suggests that 1) growth strategies and the territorial politics they produce are products of the post-Mao urban hierarchy rather than of socialist legacies, and 2) surprisingly, local governments exercise the greatest control over urban land in cities that adopted market reforms earliest (Simmons, 2004).

Krieger and Lerach (2016) propose a comprehensive model of the political economy of land grabbing. It is based on arguments related to property rights assignments, societal power relations along the core-periphery dimension, as well as distributional, ethnic, and resource-exhausting conflict. In times of global 'land rush,' the corrupt elite in the core increasingly considers land in the periphery as a valuable resource, thereby challenging the existing formal or informal land rights of the local population. This state intrusion in the periphery could be the source of significant (ethnic) grievances, resulting in disagreement and conflict.

C. Land Conflict Related Study in Bangladesh

Regrettably, the matter of land dispute in Bangladesh has not received sufficient attention from researchers. However, there exist certain papers that contribute to the understanding of the land wars in Bangladesh. Billah (2017) analyzes the primary land laws during the colonial and post-colonial periods of the country and their correlation with poverty. The poverty in Bangladesh arises from the accumulation and interdependent nature of various forms of deprivation. Although poverty has been decreasing over time, the severity and intensity of poverty in the country nevertheless persists.

Specifically, the level of poverty in rural areas remains exceedingly elevated. The report contends that land rules in Bangladesh are inherently detrimental to the poor due to their complicated nature and the overwhelming influence of local politics. Therefore, similar to numerous developing nations, the availability of land might be regarded as a significant factor influencing poverty in Bangladesh. The increasing disparities and volatility in rural areas also contribute to the migration towards urban areas, hence exacerbating the levels of urban impoverishment (LANDac, 2016).

Another study on land management and governance in Bangladesh shows the challenges of administration and pitfalls of existing government land policies, discussing corruption and irregularities in the context of land conflicts in Bangladesh (TIB, 2015). Tenure insecurity is high due to outdated and unfair laws and policies. This results in increasing conflicts over land rights and widespread land grabbing. Not only has that, but land law regimes also consist of structural loopholes and ideological drawbacks, which are enough to make reform attempted dysfunctional. Wealthy and influential people encroach on public lands with false documents and obtain court decrees to confirm their ownership. It proliferates and perpetuates the endemic nature of land disputes. This land management system is not only full of intricacy, procedural difficulties, and mismanagement but also not accessible and responsive to the interests of the common people of the country.

This literature review highlights the insufficient amount of research that investigates the primary participants in conflicts and the ways in which their relationships influence land disputes. Comprehending the motives, relationships, and objectives of the parties involved in a conflict is crucial for comprehending any conflict. However, due to the sensitive nature of land conflicts in rural regions, investigating this topic can be challenging. Researchers face challenges in collecting authentic data in such scenarios due to the involvement of either vulnerable farmers or influential

leaders in rural regions. Moreover, there has been a prevailing inclination to prioritize the examination of the causes of land conflicts, relegating the people involved to a secondary role in the research. There is a scarcity of scholarly works in Bangladesh that have endeavored to delineate the relationship between conflict parties involved in a land conflict. Mapping the interconnections between the individuals involved in land conflicts is crucial for comprehending the underlying causes of such conflicts in rural regions. The conflict mapping technique provides an interpretive framework for connecting the attitudes and motives of actors to various phases and levels of conflict.

III. FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

A. Conflict Mapping Framework

To gain a greater understanding of the interplay between conflict parties and their respective interests, we used Fisher's (2000) conflict mapping approach in the present study. Conflict mapping is a visual technique for showing the relationships between parties in a conflict. The purpose of conflict mapping is dynamic- it reflects a particular point in a changing situation and points towards action. In addition to the 'objective' aspects, it is useful to map the issues between parties that are in conflict as doing so clarifies where the power lies.

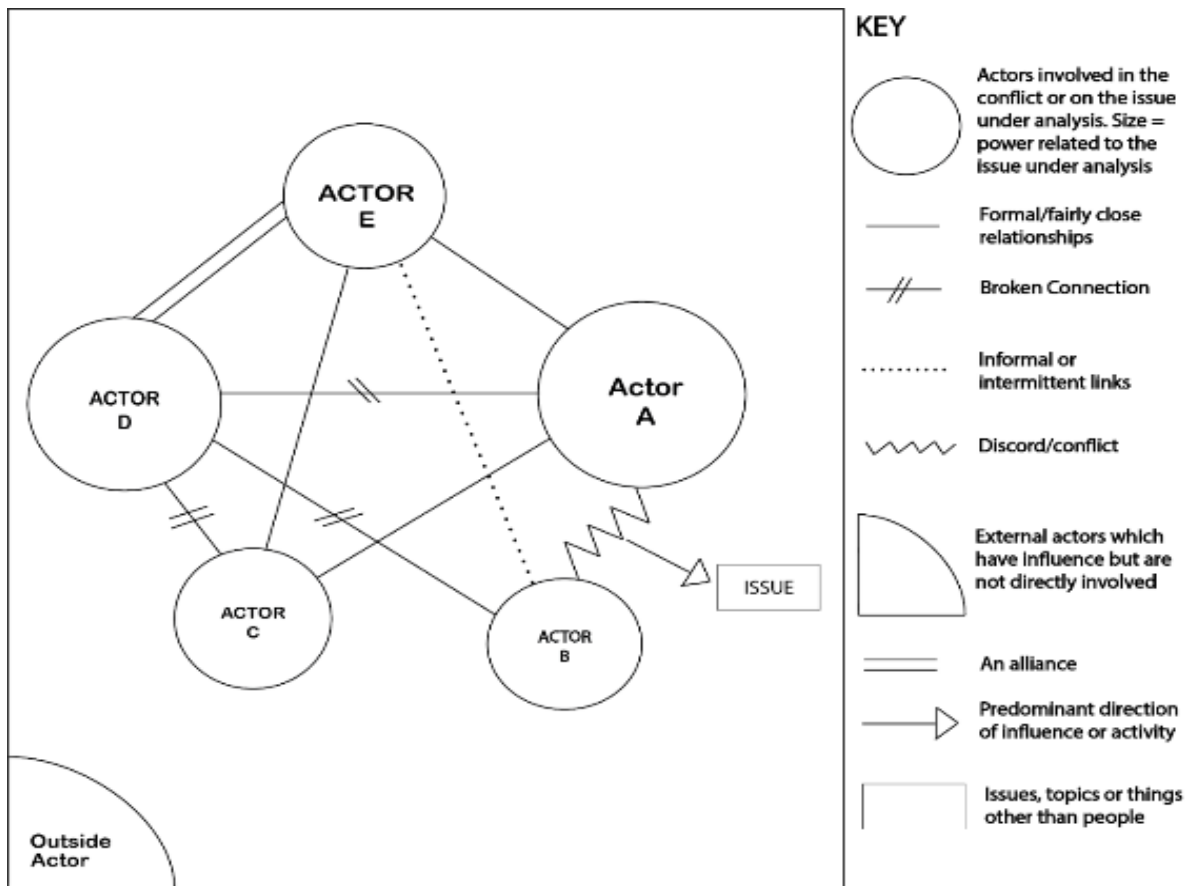


Fig. 1 Framework for mapping relationships between actors (adopted from Fisher)

B. Operational Definition

1. Land Conflict: Land conflicts occur in many forms. There are conflicts between single parties, for instance, boundary conflicts between neighbours and inheritance conflicts between siblings. There are also conflicts that involve several parties, such as group invasions or evictions, which are more difficult to deal with. However, for this study, we adopt the definition of land given by Wehrmann (2008). According to him, a land conflict can be understood as a dispute over land in which at least two parties are involved and whose origins are differences in interests regarding property rights to land, such as the right to use, manage, generate income, exclude others from the land, transfer it, and receive compensation.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach for this study was chosen because qualitative methods are especially useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events that they experience (Merriam, 1998). The qualitative research methods used for this study are described further below and

include purposive sampling, open-ended interviewing, and systematic data collection and analysis procedures.

A. Study Area

The study has been conducted in four different upazilas (sub-districts) from three different districts in Bangladesh, which are Mohammadpur Upazila from Magura district and Saltha Upazilla from Faridpur, Gunbaha union in Boyamari upazila from Faridpur district, and Chotovakla union in Goalundo upazila from Rajbari district. These upazillas were selected through convenient sampling as both of these are land conflict-prone areas and the researcher had easy access.

B. Data Collection Methods

The primary sources of data collection for this study were KII interviews, focus group discussions, and expert interviews. For this study, key informant interviews involved interviewing a group of relevant stakeholders in a land conflict in the study areas who were likely to provide needed information, ideas, and insights on land issues in the area.

TABLE II LIST OF INTERVIEWS AND FGDS

Categories of the Respondents	Respondents	Numbers of Interviews
Key informant interviews (KII)	Village Matbors	6
	People with direct experiences	16
	Journalists	7
	UP Members and Political Leaders	5
	Union Chairmen/ Head Judges of Village Court	2
	Local Bureaucrats	2
	Local Civil Society	7
	Police Officers	5
	Activists	1
	Outside observers	3
	Lawyers	2
Expert Interviews	University Teachers	5
	Civil Society	2
	Ex-bureaucrats	4
FGD participants	Village Matbors	3
	Journalist	1
	Victims	1

The focus group discussions (FGD) were with respondents from the Bhawal union, Gunbaha Union, and Choto Vakla Union. The overall situation of the study areas, issues of land conflict, the role of power elites, etc. were discussed in the FGD. The expert interviews were adopted through snowball sampling, where a total of four expert interviews were taken for this study. And lastly, the case studies were collected from the KIIs and FGD discussions in the study areas. The cases also include pieces from both national and local dailies. One of the challenges the researcher had to face in this context

was that the cases in the newspaper mainly focused on the violent aspects of such incidents without much background on the conflict.

V. MAPPING THE ROLE OF DIFFERENT ACTORS IN RURAL LAND CONFLICT

This section analyses the data found from the KIIs, FGD, and expert interviews. The study areas included four upazilas from three districts that are from the countryside and share

similar kinds of characteristics, such as being agriculture-dependent and conflict-prone. This opens the scope for an in-depth overview of the land conflicts in these areas. The analysis focuses on discussions about the role of different actors (e.g., farmers, neighbours, family members, political leaders, etc.) in land conflicts in rural areas of Bangladesh. In this context, the nature of actors has been divided into direct stakeholders (the actors who are the direct parties to the dispute) and indirect stakeholders (the actors or parties who can influence the conflicting situation or have any involvement with the direct stakeholders). The roles of actors in this context are interconnected with each other and dominated by the power structure of rural society. After a brief discussion of their role, this section analyses the relationship between these actors in different forms of land conflict in rural areas (i.e., conflict within families over land, dispute between neighbours, land grabbing, conflict over arable land, etc.). It also explains how different conflict actors fit into the process of a conflict gradually shifting towards violence as the intensity of the conflict changes.

A. Direct Stakeholders/Actors of the Conflict

1. Farmers: The dominant involvement of farmers as primary actors in rural land conflicts, particularly in the context of disputes over arable land, is a consensus among key informant interviewees (KIIs) and experts. Significantly, farmers who hold influential positions exert substantial authority over not only their own properties but also, consequently, the properties of less privileged farmers. As a result, marginal farmers are the most susceptible and oppressed individuals in the dynamics of rural land conflicts. The conclusion of latent land disputes typically becomes visible during crucial agricultural activities, such as the crop cutting season, as noted by multiple KII respondents. An insightful remark from one of the Key Informants (KIIs) illustrates this occurrence: *“The farmers of Saltha upazila commonly experience conflict during the Hemant season, which is the period when crops are harvested.”* The farmers in this context actively engage in the conflict, with a considerable number of them originating from disadvantaged families in the region (Personal Communication [1], September 10, 2019). This highlights the interconnectedness of socio-economic conditions and agricultural methods, which magnifies the consequences of land conflicts on the most disadvantaged sections of rural communities.

2. Neighbors: Land disputes in rural Bangladesh often led to conflicts over land boundaries between neighboring entities, which is a common occurrence. During the interviews with key informants, a recurring theme emerged regarding situations that give rise to disputes. These situations typically revolve around roads that have not been built or land that does not have proper documentation. Inevitably, conflicts arise when a piece of land becomes a point of contention between two neighboring parties. According to a respondent, there are instances where two neighbors have conflicting interests in purchasing or occupying the same piece of land, leading to a conflict. In addition, the findings from various

respondents highlight a recurring trend in which neighbors deliberately focus on certain vulnerable groups, like orphaned children, as a means to gain control over their land (Personal Interview, September 10). The key informant said, *“Particularly, if the land is in a good position, such as close to the main road of that area, the neighbours will pursue the land regardless of their legal rights. Again, in many cases, any construction by a neighbour may create obstacles for other neighbours to commute, which may lead to further possibility of conflict.”* The intricate interaction of various elements sheds light on the diverse aspects of land conflicts in rural settings, highlighting the importance of comprehending these dynamics and motivations that drive these disputes.

3. Family Parcener: The role of the family parcener in rural land conflicts has become increasingly important, as highlighted by respondents in key informant interviews (KII). The significance of this issue is closely tied to the concept of population growth, where the distribution of inheritance, especially regarding land assets, becomes a central point of conflict. It is worth mentioning that there are numerous cases where brothers, who are responsible for ensuring a fair distribution of inheritance, unfairly deny female heirs their rightful portion of land ownership. Conflicts can arise within families and society when the aggrieved family, representing the interests of disenfranchised female heirs, protests against discriminatory practices. The complex relationship between demographic changes and inheritance practices plays a crucial role in influencing the dynamics of conflicts over rural land. It is essential to thoroughly analyze and comprehend this interplay within an academic context.

B. Indirect Stakeholders

1. Local Matbors: The complex interplay of rural land conflicts is made even more convoluted by the subtle yet significant influence of local Matbors, also known as village leaders. This study suggests that the prolonged duration of land conflicts in villages can be attributed, to a large extent, to the intentional engagement of Matbors. These individuals strategically exploit these circumstances to strengthen and maintain their positions within the local community. It is evident that influential figures often initiate conflicts, which in turn benefit Matbors greatly. Being granted the status of Matbor is not just a symbolic gesture for financially secure farmers who own large amounts of land. In fact, it has practical implications, as some individuals in this group are involved in the unethical practice of land grabbing. The intricate relationship between economic status, social standing, and participation in land disputes highlights the complex nature of the rural landscape. In addition, the study reveals a mutually beneficial connection between Matbors, and individuals involved in land disputes. Matbors, situated at the upper levels of societal hierarchy, offer protection to farmers engaged in land grabbing, thus strengthening their sway and dominance over local power structures.

The connection between land disputes and long legal proceedings also plays an important role here. According to one of the interviewees, *“As parties involved in conflicts are required to spend a lot of money and time to start and maintain legal cases over land, eventually the conflicting parties cannot continue such cases. Instead, they have to rely on the local setting of alternative dispute resolution (ADR), which is also known as Shalish in the Bangladeshi context. In numerous instances, the ‘‘Matbors,’’ who are often the ‘‘judges’’ of these informal dispute resolutions, have displayed a clear bias towards their preferred parties when rendering decisions.”* The findings suggest that there are various avenues through which a party can garner favor from the Matbors. One possibility is that the party is affiliated with Matbor’s circle or faction, aiding him in maintaining influence within the village. Within this context, the Matbor’s relationship with the favored party (patron-client relationship) influences their judgment, leading to bias. In another scenario, the Matbors may have a preference for a certain party in exchange for bribes. In addition, the study sheds light on the involvement of influential leaders in the area, who use bribery to manipulate land documents by colluding with land office officials. This analysis highlights the importance of having a comprehensive understanding of the complex social and political factors that contribute to conflicts over rural land. It reveals the interconnected web of power dynamics, corruption, and personal agendas that are often present in these disputes.

2. Political Leaders: Political leaders in rural land conflicts typically adopt a primarily passive or indirect stance, but empirical evidence from key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and expert interviews highlights their significant influence within the power structure of rural areas. According to one of the experts, *“Political leaders, although seemingly passive, hold the highest position in the power structure. This shift occurred in the 1990s when they replaced Matbors as the main actors in this hierarchy. This transformation is highlighted by the merging of established power hierarchies and the rise of a fresh cohort of political figures aligned with distinct political factions, thus reshaping the existing power dynamics in rural areas.”* Significantly, there are numerous occasions where former Matbors effectively move into political leadership positions, while in other instances, whole new persons emerge to influence the distribution of power through political involvement. The study identifies a mutually beneficial interaction between persons involved in land-grabbing activities and local political officials, who frequently offer assistance either due to their positions of authority or their affiliation with the ruling party. This nexus highlights the increasing significance of political power in the domain of property disputes.

Notwithstanding this shift, the conventional Matbor system continues to exist at the local level, maintaining its power to settle conflicts. Nevertheless, the origin of power for Matbors has seen a change, currently emerging from political leaders. Instances are highlighted where political leaders, regardless

of their party affiliations, participate in land grabs that specifically target opposition party leaders, religious minorities, or indigenous populations. This highlights the way land conflicts are being politicized. Interestingly, the statement contradicts the viewpoints obtained from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), as no mention of such incidents was reported. This suggests a possible disconnect between the narratives of experts and the actual experiences of the community in this particular situation. This comprehensive analysis provides insight into the changing dynamics of power structures, emphasizing the interaction between conventional and modern influences that define the complex terrain of rural land disputes.

3. Law-Enforcing Agency: Law enforcement agencies, often represented by the police force in rural areas, have a crucial role in resolving conflicts, especially those concerning land matters. However, the effectiveness of addressing such conflicts is often limited by a range of obstacles. An interesting example can be found in the study area of Mohammadpur, where the lack of sufficient police force is recognized as a major obstacle in efficiently handling land-related conflicts. One possible solution to improve the situation is to increase the number of police stations, which would help the force better handle land conflicts. However, the research findings highlight a significant drawback - the police administration’s lack of full autonomy, making it vulnerable to political influences. The dynamic relationship between law enforcement and political factors undermines the likelihood of receiving unbiased treatment from police officers, thus adding to the perception of unfairness in resolving land disputes. The argument that a neutral position from the police force has the potential to significantly decrease conflicts highlights the complex connection between law enforcement, political power, and the goal of fair conflict resolution in rural regions.

4. Government Officers (Bureaucrats): Various external actors, including magistrates, traveling courts, and government officers, play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of land conflicts within rural power hierarchies. Government officers, particularly the Assistant Commissioners of Lands (AC Lands) and Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs), play a crucial role in this framework, although their authority to address land conflicts is limited. According to a former bureaucrat who is an expert in this field, it is worth noting that interventions by ACs or UNOs often face a lack of local support. This limitation was emphasized during a personal communication on November 22. It is important to address the societal division in rural landscapes, where the influence of Matbors and other community leaders is significant, leading to skepticism towards government involvement.

An insightful remark from a government official sheds light on the difficulties encountered by these external participants. The official emphasizes the limited knowledge among the local population as a significant obstacle, stating, *“The*

primary difficulty lies in the lack of awareness among the people in the region. As an AC landowner, I lack the authority to address the issue they are presenting due to their insufficient documentation. Regarding personal property, no action can be taken if the paperwork is not correct, as stated in a recent communication (Personal Communication, 2021). The recognition of this fact highlights the dynamic nature of power structure in rural areas and the challenges faced by bureaucratic systems in resolving land conflicts, especially when it comes to issues related to documentation and property rights. Understanding the complexities of land conflicts in rural areas requires a deep analysis of the interactions between government officers, societal leaders, and local perceptions.

5. Employees of the Land Office: As per standard procedures, officials from the land office are required to record land measurements through on-site assessments. Nevertheless, there is a common occurrence of straying from the established procedure, where officials often depend solely on spoken claims, especially within the homes of local Matbors. This departure from prescribed practices engenders a vulnerability to external influence, thereby jeopardizing the rightful ownership of land. The presence of these procedural irregularities contributes to conflicts related to land grabbing, showcasing a situation where the effectiveness of land recording procedures is compromised. According to an interviewee, *“It is common for officials to only document land verbally, often in the home of a local Matbor. It is not uncommon for officials to be influenced, resulting in the unfortunate consequence of the rightful owner losing their land”* (Personal Communication [2], September 12, 2019). The recognition of this systemic deviation highlights the complex relationship between procedural lapses, influential local figures, and the origin of land conflicts, thus requiring thorough analysis within an academic context.

6. People Outside of the Area: Landowners in rural areas who do not maintain permanent residency are considered to be more vulnerable to land conflicts, especially during agricultural seasons like the jute cultivation period. Active engagement with local communities is essential to protect their property from potential seizure, given the temporal nature of their presence in regions where they own or have inherited land. Establishing and maintaining relationships with local residents becomes crucial for absentee landowners, especially during critical agricultural phases. This is essential for effectively managing the land. Disputes can sometimes arise between non-resident landowners and their locally situated relatives who oversee their land, adding an extra layer of complexity. Conflicts frequently arise due to differing interests, such as contrasting preferences regarding the cultivation of specific crops on a shared piece of land. Without a support system, non-resident landowners find themselves in a vulnerable position. They are forced to either negotiate and make concessions with local stakeholders or engage in lengthy legal disputes to defend their land rights.

7. Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society: A variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have implemented projects in rural areas to reduce the severity of land disputes. A notable facet of their intervention involves promoting education, predicated on the premise that individuals with higher educational attainment exhibit a reduced propensity for engaging in conflict. There is a clear link between participating in conflicts and having lower levels of education or dropping out of school. Concurrently, NGOs actively prioritize initiatives aimed at enhancing awareness among the uneducated populace regarding legal documentation, with the overarching goal of fostering a nuanced understanding of their rights and legal recourse options. This collaborative endeavor demonstrates a comprehensive strategy utilized by non-governmental organizations to tackle the underlying issues of land disputes, incorporating both educational empowerment and legal literacy among rural populations.

C. Relationship between Actors in Different Forms of Land Conflict

1. Conflict within Family: In rural areas of Bangladesh, land-related conflicts are particularly prevalent, especially when it comes to family disputes. The distribution of land often becomes a major source of contention in these cases. These conflicts, whether intra-familial or inter-familial, often manifest as a direct consequence of disparities in land allocation. When it comes to conflicts between families, a clear pattern can be observed where the family with a larger number of members tends to exert dominance over disputed land using forceful methods. The complex relationship between family dynamics and the use of force highlights the many layers of land conflicts in rural areas, calling for a thorough analysis of the social, economic, and legal factors that contribute to their continuation.

The linkages of the conflicting parties to the rural power structure play an important role in deciding the outcome of the conflict. As the conflicts take place in rural areas, they are easily influenced by the local elites (most of the time, the Matbors). In the case of conflict within a family, the family members who are engaged in the conflict usually support two local matrons. In a village, two Matbors are never in the same position. The Matbors who are close to the local political leaders get an advantage in this context. As the political leader or Member of Parliament is in the top position of the power structure, the Matbor who has close linkage with him or her gets control over the law-enforcing agency. Thus, the family member who got closer linkage with the privileged elites (in this case, Matbor A) is also in a privileged position. Moreover, he or she can often get control over the employees of the land office and manipulate the documents at their will. As a result, the other family member who is not connected with the more privileged Matbor is more likely to lose his or her control over the land, even if he or she gets the court judgment in their favor.

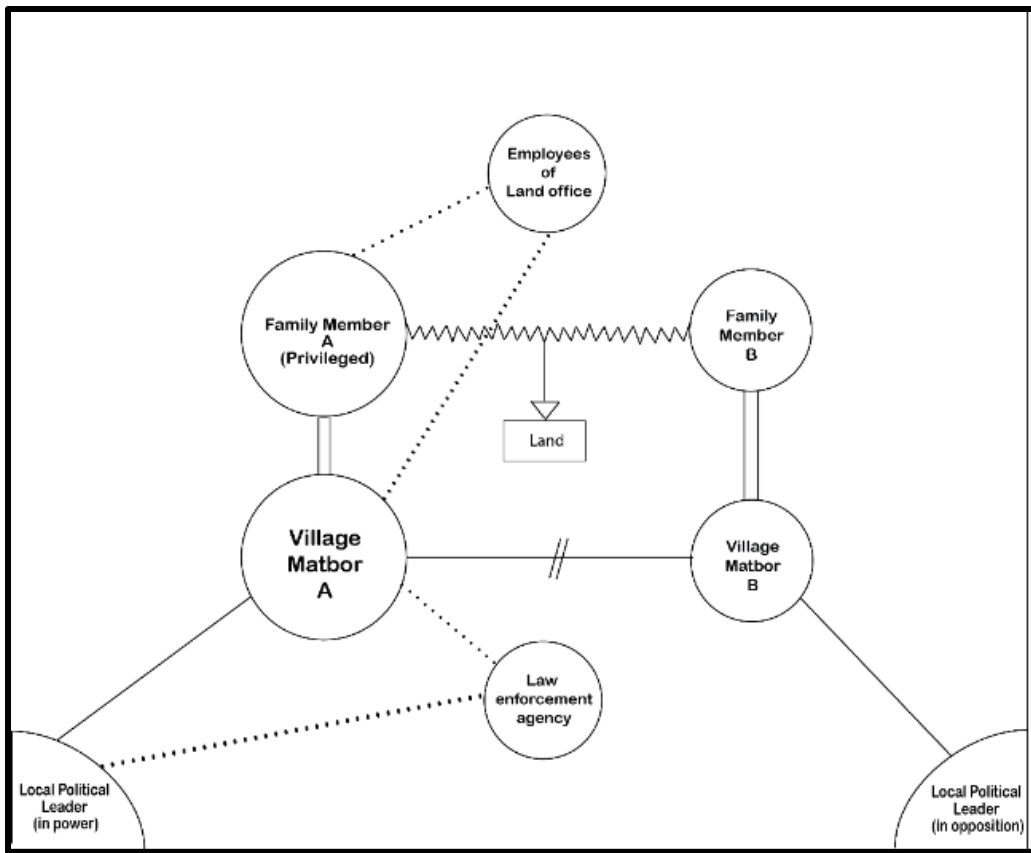


Fig. 2 Relationship mapping between different actors in family dispute over land

2. *Dispute Between Neighbors*: Land disputes with neighbors are frequently observed in rural Bangladesh, reflecting the wider range of conflicts over rural land. Like other forms of land-related conflicts, this particular type is deeply embedded

in the local power dynamics, reflecting a nuanced interaction between social relationships, political alliances, and economic factors.

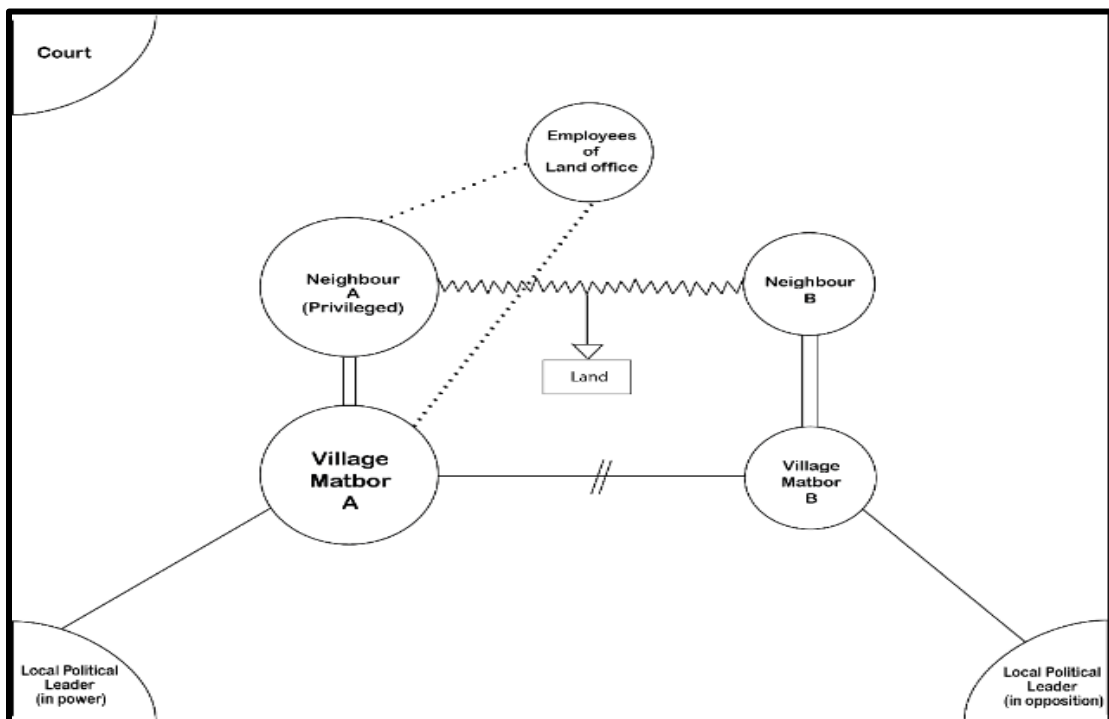


Fig. 3 Relationship mapping in dispute between neighbors over land

Similar to family disputes over lands, conflicts between neighbors in rural areas are impacted by the dynamics of local power structures. The influential Matbor A holds significant sway in deciding the resolutions of these disputes. The complex dynamics are further complicated by the important role played by land office employees, highlighting the importance of accurate documentation in the origin and resolution of conflicts. Frequently, conflicts arise because of insufficient documentation, and when the land office conducts surveys, the parties involved attempt to influence the results in their own favor.

In this particular scenario, what stands out is the active involvement of the Matbor, who has the power to manipulate the records and survey procedures, especially if the results don't align with the interests of the Matbor's supporter or

client, in this case, the privileged neighbor (Neighbor A). This in-depth analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics involved in rural land conflicts. It highlights the significant influence of local figures in shaping the legal and bureaucratic aspects of disputes between neighbors over land.

3. *Conflict Over Arable Land:* Conflicts over arable land in rural areas typically revolve around farmers. However, an interesting aspect emerges when village Matbors, who are often farmers (rich farmers) themselves, actively engage in these disputes, like other types of conflict. The unique dynamic brought about by their roles as local leaders and cultivators adds an important aspect to the landscape of land disputes.

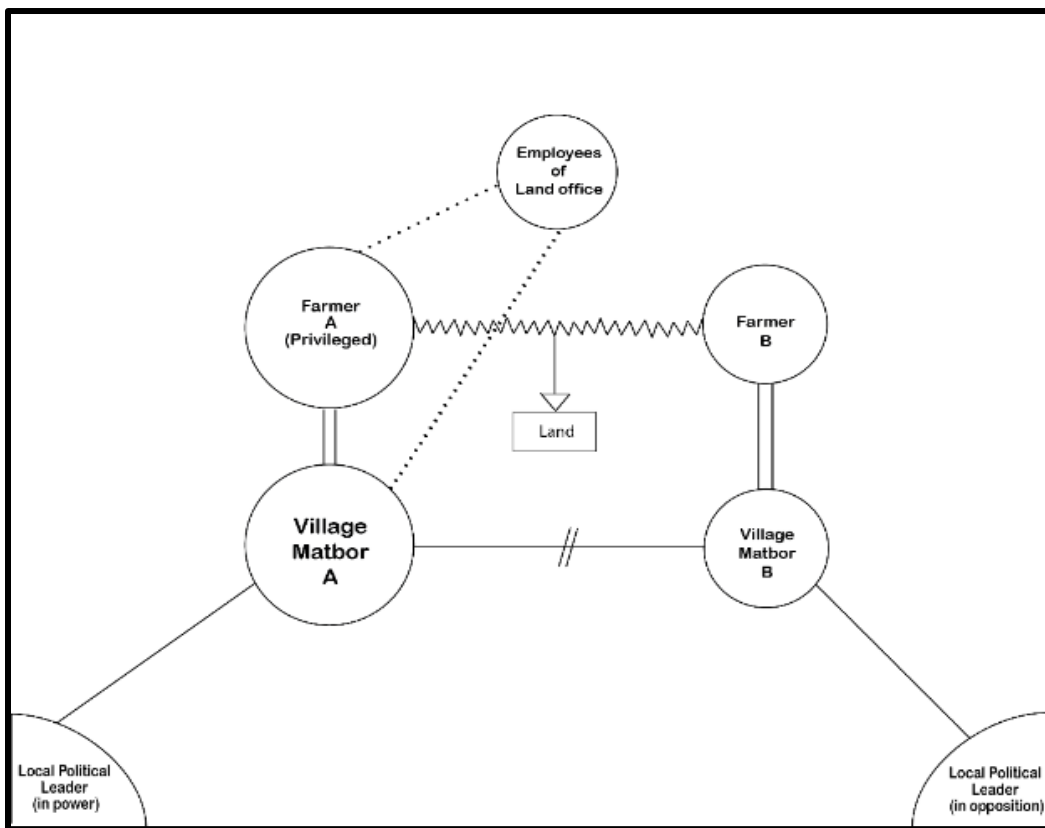


Fig.4 Relationship between actors in arable land conflict

The pattern of the relationship in this context is not much different from the other forms of land conflict that have already been mentioned above. However, unlike other forms of conflict, this form of land conflict has a continuity feature, especially during the time of crop cutting, which may reemerge even after complete de-escalation. One of the KII interviewees stated, "Most of the land-based clashes took place in Saltha, mainly due to the cutting of the land. The collision only occurs when one farmer crosses the isle of the crops and enters in another farmer's land (in many cases deliberately)."

4. *Land Grabbing:* The issue of land grabbing in rural Bangladesh is a complex land conflict that primarily arises from the abuse of power. Powerful individuals take advantage of their positions, resulting in the illegal seizure of land, which disproportionately impacts marginalized communities like indigenous groups and small-scale farmers. The prevalence of land grabbing is influenced by legal ambiguities, weak enforcement, and corruption within administrative institutions. The issue at hand is marked by its complexity, as it involves environmental consequences, displacement of communities, and the resulting social tensions.

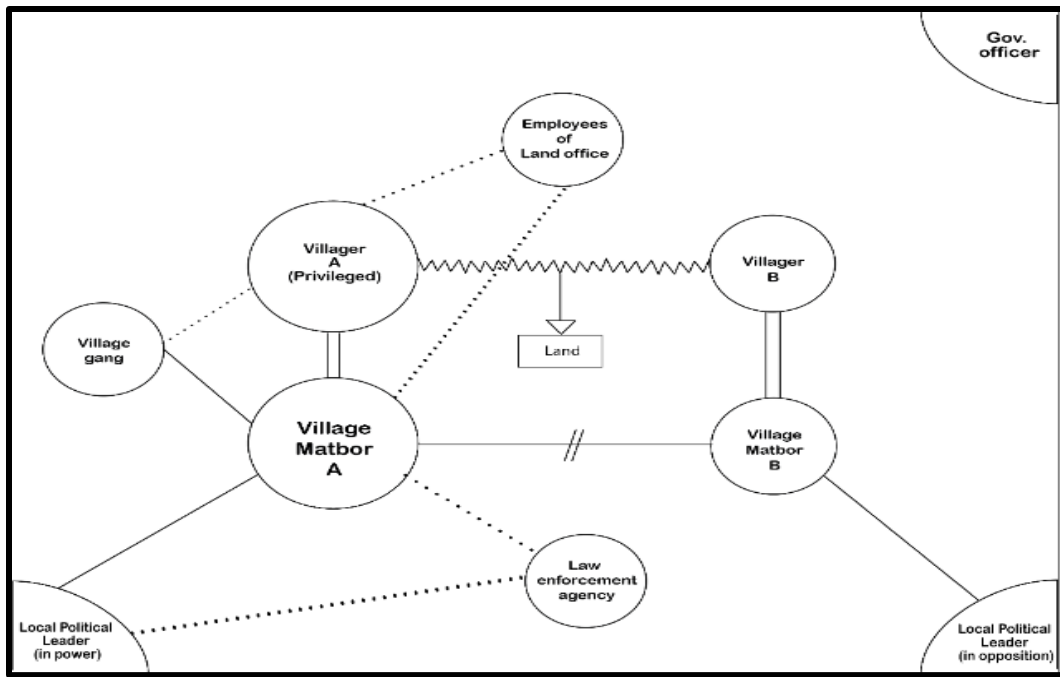


Fig. 5 Relationship between actors in land grabbing related conflict

Rural land conflicts and land grabbing are primarily caused by villagers or local individuals who have abundant resources and established positions of authority. Political leaders have a significant role in these ever-changing situations, sometimes actively engaging in such confrontations. A unique form of property dispute arises when “Borga Chashi,” persons who have returned from overseas with considerable

money, unlawfully appropriate land from legitimate owners with the assistance of established power structures. On the other hand, disputes can occur when landlords use aggressive methods to take land from persons who are less powerful or economically disadvantaged, frequently through ongoing threats and coercive practices.

D. Land Conflict in Rural Areas of Bangladesh

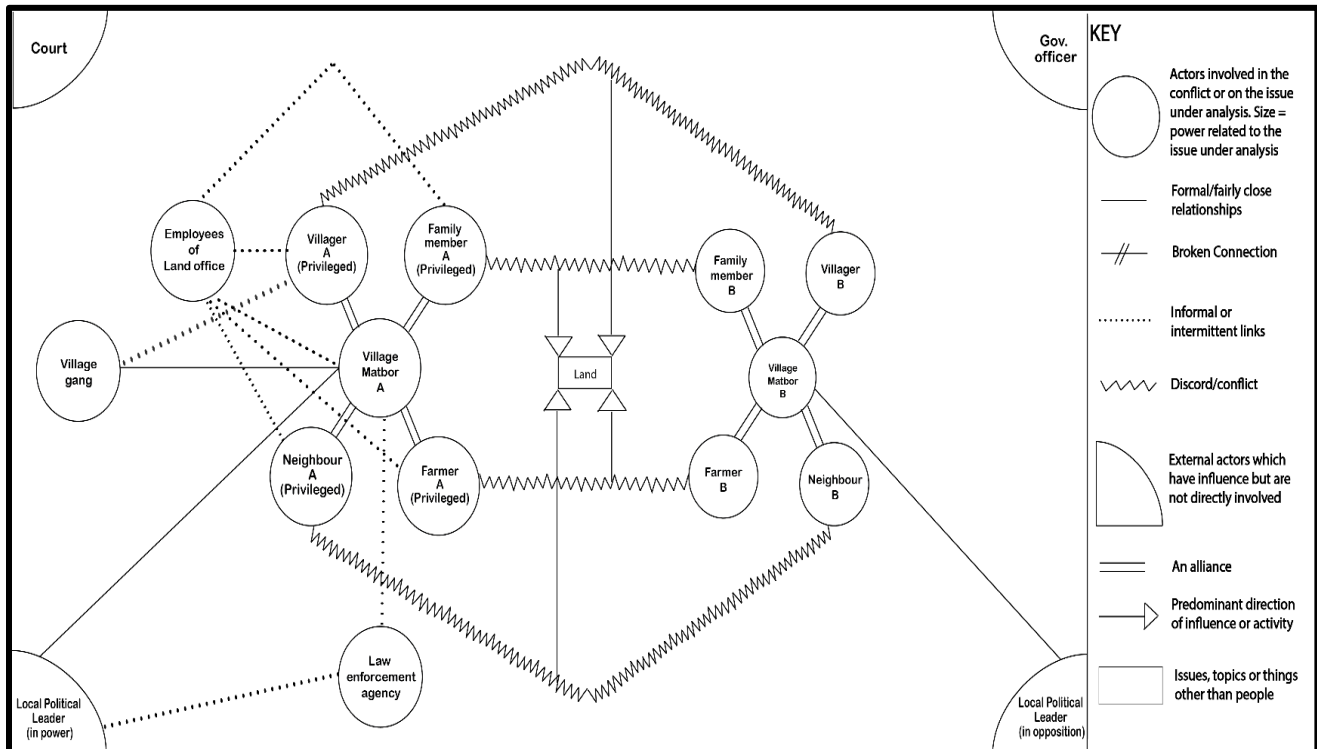


Fig. 6 Actor mapping of land conflicts in rural areas of Bangladesh

The discussions mentioned above highlight the complex nature of relationships between different parties involved in land conflicts, revealing a nuanced complexity that is present in each unique type of dispute. Despite the various ways in which these phenomena are expressed, there is a clear commonality in the patterns of relationships that underlie them. At the heart of these dynamics lies the crucial role of influential elites, whose power not only shapes the conflicts but also forms a mutually beneficial connection with the land administration. As a result, resolving disputes often prioritizes power dynamics over seeking justice. This underscores a systemic issue where socio-economic power imbalances heavily influence the course of land conflicts in various rural settings.

E. Actors in Conflict Escalation and De-Escalation

In Mitchell’s (1981) thorough analysis, readers gain a deep understanding of conflict escalation and the complex dynamics that are inherent in conflicts. Mitchell’s analysis delves into the intricate dynamics of conflict, focusing on the expansion and intensification of conflicts over time. Conflict widening occurs when more parties become involved in the original situation of incompatible goals. Existing parties

introduce new issues, leading to fresh conflicts. New entities are formed to address existing issues, and new groups become politically involved in the conflict. Additionally, new issues arise as the hopes, plans, and aspirations of the parties involved evolve. Furthermore, the phenomenon of conflict escalation, as described by Mitchell, involves a repetitive sequence marked by consistently similar and frequent interactions that occur over a prolonged period of time. This process of escalation amplifies the level of devastation, motivates more people towards harmful activities, and draws in more resources into the arena of conflict. In addition, the escalation process is characterized by clear thresholds that, when crossed, fundamentally change the nature of the conflict. These thresholds can include the use of threats, coercion that imposes costs, and physical violence (Mitchell, 1981). Figure 9 presents a visual depiction of the various roles that actors play in the process of land conflict escalation and de-escalation in rural areas. These roles are categorized into eight different levels. This theoretical framework, based on Mitchell’s thorough analysis, provides a structured perspective to grasp the intricate development of conflicts, leading to a more profound comprehension of their diverse nature in rural settings.

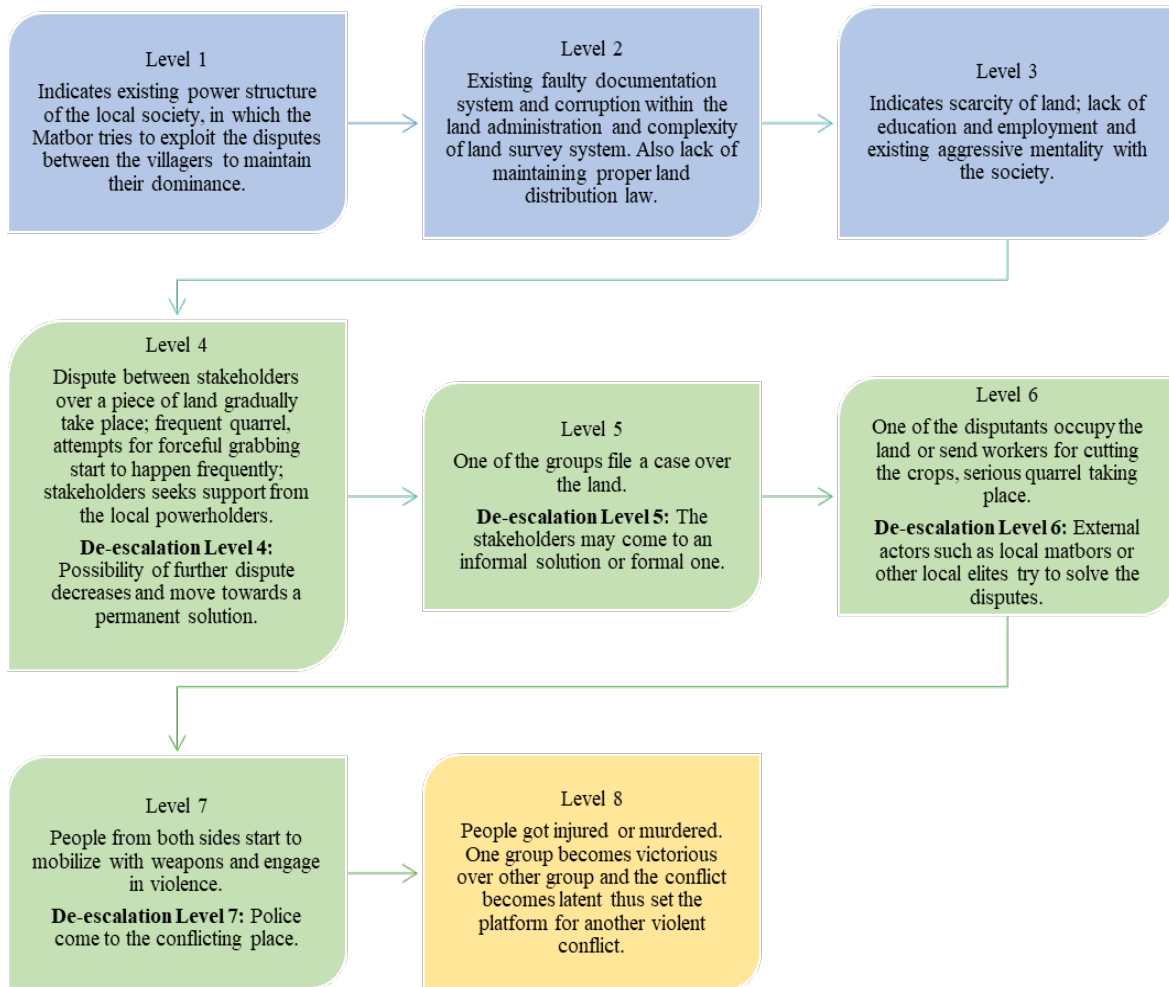


Fig. 7 Actor involvement in land conflicts of rural areas in Bangladesh

VI. DISCUSSIONS

Land-related conflicts are complex matters in the rural areas of Bangladesh. The data analysis shows clearly that the complexity originates from how the direct and indirect stakeholders engage with each other. Their relational dynamics are what create and sustain such conflicts. The structural causes, local power structure, and cultural aspects fuel the relational dynamic further. In the context of the first objective, the result shows that the relationship between the actors is quite complicated. The local political economy is closely embedded in this relationship. The local power structure is still dominated by the Matbor system, a leftover from feudal society. Most of the interviewees mention that the power structure of the village plays an important role in land conflict. Considering the case of Saltha upazila, the Matbors often try to ensure their presence in conflicts in the area. The upazila is considered one of the most conflict-prone areas in greater Faridpur, and respondents mention one common factor as being the village factionalism created based on the Matbor system. They are the sole body that can conduct Shalish, the local method of conflict resolution. Corrupt managers take bribes from parties to make biased decisions. Moreover, there can be several Matbors in one single union, and they have their own group.

The people of the area have to support or be involved with one of these groups, or they have to live separately from society. Conflict is one of the tools by which these Matbor groups maintain their power over the village. The more conflict that occurs, the more they can exercise their power and keep themselves relevant. The rural leaders always need an agenda to keep their power intact, and land conflict helps them do that. However, the Matbors cannot control the area without political support. A power structure can be drawn in this context.

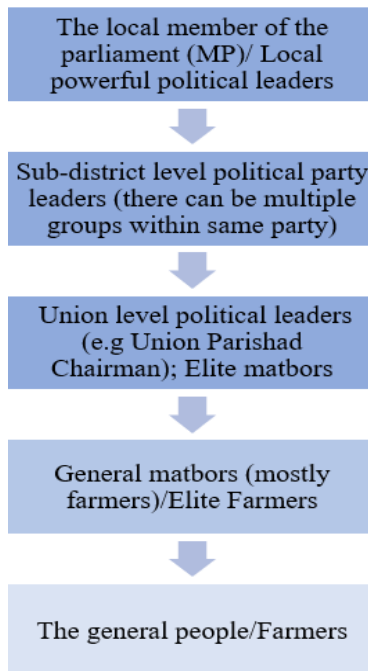


Fig. 8 Power structure of rural areas in Bangladesh

The land administration’s role as actors in land conflict emerged as a main obstacle to resolving land conflicts across all thirty interviews and the FGDs. Following the traditional system in land administration is found to be one of the main reasons for these conflicts in the study areas. There are several sectors related to land issues that need serious reform. For example, in the present land registration system, one has to record the ownership of land in a more or less analogous system. Neither the laws are strong enough nor are they practiced in most cases. Taking advantage of such loopholes, many people dupe buyers and sell the same land to different people at once. The complexity of the land administration also makes the role of employees of the land office prominent. The landowners are dependent on them, and taking unfair advantage of their dependency, many officials practice corruption. Also, the lack of accountability among the employees of the land office allows them to be corrupted. This is one of the main causes that makes land conflicts protracted.

All the participants reported that local power structures have a significant impact on land conflict; however, the findings showed that their impact was more significant for some participants than others. Cultural factors play a part in such circumstances. Within family conflicts, the main victims are women. The complicated process of land recording, mutation, and registration is much harder for women in rural areas to keep up with. This difficulty is further exacerbated by the lack of education for women in rural areas. According to the respondents, due to a general lack of education, people are not aware of peaceful dispute settlement. Education helps people think about alternative solutions to any kind of dispute, rather than violence.

The village farmers, who are also usually uneducated and are one of the direct stakeholders in land conflicts, actually hold the least power in such situations. According to the 2019 Agriculture Census, four million farmer families out of 1.65 crore are landless, while 67.63 lakh households are involved in cultivating other people’s land on lease or as sharecroppers (Alam & Mahmud, 2019). Once a matter of dispute over land is established, conflicting parties expect help from their supporters in the local area. For the sake of the party, everyone has to engage in a conflict with which they have no direct connection. One of the significant facts here is the type of weapon that is used in such violent conflicts. Almost all of the land conflicts in Bangladesh are conducted by “the Deshi weapons”. This upholds one side of the political economy of land conflicts. It shows the economic similarity between actors as well as the political significance of these weapons. These weapons are rarely suspected, and states do not have any licensing policies to filter their use. That is why weapons are easily accessible, less expensive, and highly effective. It also indicates a lack of supervision from the authorities.

The interviews and FGDs agree on the fact that the inability of the law enforcement agency indicates that the rule of law cannot function properly in rural areas. It shows how the problematic power structure cripples every part of society. The village farmers are the main actors in the conflict over

the arable land. Oftentimes, they engage in conflict over crops. It indicates the lack of supervision from the authority on the main source of the national economy. The findings show that these farmers are often backed by village Matbors, who are often backed by political leaders. The presence of political influence undermines the authority of law enforcement agencies, which connects such conflicts with national crises.

Resolution of land conflict issues necessitates a political determination on the part of the governing authorities to implement specific corrective measures. Without such political will, even the most innovative policies may fail to materialize. It is imperative to confront and address corruption within the land administration framework. To this end, the implementation of a comprehensive plan aimed at mitigating corruption is essential. Specifically, the anti-corruption unit should employ a sector-specific approach to effectively combat corruption in this domain. Furthermore, the establishment of a specialized entity within the judicial system dedicated to land-related disputes is recommended. The institutionalization of an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) process is critical, ensuring that less powerful parties in conflicts have a platform to voice their concerns. Initiatives such as empathy-building workshops could significantly contribute to reducing conflicts among stakeholders.

Moreover, the digitization of the entire land management system is an urgent necessity. Fully digitalizing the land registration system, inclusive of comprehensive maps and relevant data, can expedite conflict resolution. It is vital that authorities verify the authenticity of documents and adhere to existing regulations. The centralization and digitization of the land survey system under the supervision of a central office could also prevent land conflicts from being exacerbated by political, social, and corruptive influences. Additionally, enhancing the visibility of land conflicts in rural areas through mainstream media and social networking platforms is crucial for acknowledging the hardships caused by these disputes. The current lack of media attention contributes to delayed justice and prolonged legal battles, often extending over decades.

The nature and resolution mechanisms of latent and direct land conflicts differ significantly. Direct conflicts frequently bypass appropriate resolution or de-escalation processes, whereas latent conflicts may see some degree of de-escalation through local interventions. However, violent conflicts rarely de-escalate adequately, primarily due to the ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies, which can lead to the normalization of violence over time. Prolonged legal disputes contribute to societal fragmentation, which in turn reinforces the authority of local village leaders, perpetuating a cycle of conflict within rural communities.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study aims to understand the underlying factors contributing to the intractability of rural land conflicts in

Bangladesh, which have proven to be a persistent issue without any resolution in sight. This study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, with a specific emphasis on identifying the key individuals or groups responsible for perpetuating these conflicts. Significantly, our research uncovers the presence of a distinct power hierarchy in rural areas that holds sway over the resolution of conflicts, the involved parties, their interests, and occasionally, the administration of justice. The power structure encompasses both direct and indirect stakeholders in the land conflict. In this hierarchical power structure, the highest position is held by local political leaders, who represent the indirect stakeholders. They are followed by community leaders, or Matbors. Local political leaders and community leaders, commonly referred to as “Matbors,” play a significant role in the protraction and complexity of land conflicts. The primary parties involved in these disputes consist of various categories of farmers (wealthy farmers, “Barga Chashi,” impoverished farmers, and marginalized day laborers), as well as their family members and neighbors who hold a lower position in the power hierarchy. Evidently, even though these actors have a vested interest, they are not the main hindrances to resolving land conflicts. On the other hand, it is the indirect stakeholders mentioned above, positioned at the top of the power structure, who pose significant challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to examine this power dynamic to comprehend the intricate nature and aggression often associated with land conflicts. In this context, the political leaders at the top of the hierarchy play a more passive or indirect role. However, the study reveals that the dynamics and pattern of their influence in these conflicts have changed as rural areas become more charged by the political parties, shifting from the conventional Matbor system. Individuals in close proximity to or influenced by these leaders often take advantage of any given circumstance to further their own interests, leveraging the reputation and influence of these political figures. Utilizing their identity to sway the outcome of land disputes is also a component of this matter. Furthermore, influential individuals in the region have the ability to fabricate documents from land offices through the use of bribes to officials. Adding another layer to the complexity of these conflicts is the involvement of both the ruling political leaders and those in opposition, who seek to exert their influence on local matters in order to stay relevant. Supporters of political leaders in power often manipulate land issues to target and intimidate those who support opposing leaders. A similar scenario also arises in conflicts within political parties.

However, the local Matbors, or village leaders, still play the most significant roles in rural land conflicts. The role of these individuals is undeniable in the prolonged land conflicts within villages, as it helps them maintain their position in the area. When the Matbor holds a position of political leadership within the ruling party or is a trusted ally of the leader, their influence is further amplified. Those farmers who possess a significant amount of land and enjoy a stable economic position are granted the esteemed title of Matbor. There are certain affluent farmers, who also possess the Matbor

designation, who are engaged in the unethical practice of land grabbing. The Matbors derive advantages from every instance of such conflicts. When a case is filed after a conflict over land issues, these already vulnerable and poor farmers are subjected to a perpetual cycle of legal battles, entangled in a complex web of bureaucratic formalities. For these individuals in dire circumstances, the prospect of multiple court appearances is a cause of immense distress. It further drains their already scarce resources and pushes them to the brink of despair. These farmers eventually abandon their pursuit of legal action due to the overwhelming financial strain and frustration of seeking justice through traditional courts. Numerous individuals turn to the informal community dispute resolution mechanism called “Shalish” in a sincere endeavor to seek a resolution. According to the findings, the Matbor, who holds the responsibility of making crucial decisions in these judgment settings, might be swayed by financial incentives or personal connections with a particular conflicting party. This can result in unjust judgments and contribute to a culture of corruption within the dispute resolution system. In addition, it is worth noting that the police administration may not possess complete independence and could be subject to political influences. Consequently, the likelihood of receiving fair treatment from police officers appears to be quite low. These conflicts could have been significantly reduced if the police had maintained a neutral stance. A recurring problem lies with dishonest officials in land offices who are susceptible to bribery. As a result, the rightful owner inevitably ends up losing their land.

The influence exerted by Matbors and political leaders plays a significant and influential role in intensifying land disputes. The intricate interplay among local political figures, community leaders, and landownership gives rise to a complex landscape for the fair resolution of conflicts, resulting in the plight of vulnerable farmers. These power structures have a tendency to take advantage of the vulnerable by leveraging social and political connections and navigating complex landownership issues. The farmers who are at a disadvantage find themselves caught in a system where their ability to seek justice is overshadowed by the power held by those in positions of authority. In such a setting, the resolution of land conflicts transcends the realm of legality and becomes a delicate negotiation of power dynamics. To address land conflicts, it is essential for governments to show political determination, tackle corruption, and implement sector-specific strategies. Establishing specialized judicial entities and digitizing land management and registration systems are critical steps towards transparency and expedited resolution. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) processes and empathy-building workshops can aid in understanding and cooperation among stakeholders. Increasing media awareness of rural land conflicts is also vital to prevent prolonged legal disputes and societal fragmentation. A comprehensive approach involving legal, technological, and socio-political strategies is necessary for effective conflict resolution.

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