

Moral and Other Economies

Nijera Kori and Its Alternatives to Microcredit

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Introduction

Nijera Kori, Bangladesh's largest movement of landless people, is committed to mobilizing the rural poor to demand their rights; in so doing, they actively reject microcredit and the service-delivery approach that it exemplifies. This rejection is noteworthy in a country that has become known as the "birthplace of microcredit" and that boasts more microcredit borrowers per square mile than any other country in the world (Yunus 2011). This chapter examines the politics of Nijera Kori's rejection of microcredit, grounded in the particular moral economy of Bangladesh's traditional peasant society: "their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation" (Scott 1976, 3). This politics offers not only a critique of microcredit and the contemporary global development paradigm, but also a radical alternative to the normative vision of rural life they promote. While microcredit programs, equipped with the rhetoric of empowerment of rural communities, claim to address the concerns linked to this moral economy, they do so in such a way as to hollow out any analysis of the resource disparity and injustice that are at its very core. Alternatively, the work of Nijera Kori not only honors Bangladesh's traditional peasant moral economy, but in fact strengthens the frameworks through which peasants can struggle to achieve social justice.

At the center of Nijera Kori's divergence from microcredit programs is a fundamentally different interpretation of the historical foundations of poverty and inequality in rural Bangladesh. This interpretation recognizes that poverty is produced within a particular political-economic context and that a focus on this agrarian political economy suggests a manifestly different agenda for addressing poverty and development. In her trenchant critique of microcredit programs

in Cairo, Julia Elyachar (2005, 193) explains that “the notion of empowerment became an important underpinning to neoliberal programs that ‘respond to the sufferer as if they were the author of their own misfortune.’” Nijera Kori’s critique of microcredit, along with its advocacy and mobilization work, starts from the premise that the cause of poverty is not a lack of resources, but instead the unequal distribution of resources. The critique also insists that the poor and marginalized are not responsible for their own privation, which, in fact, stems from a historical pattern of injustice and inequity that has only been exacerbated by the expansion of capitalism in rural Bangladesh, including the proliferation of microcredit programs.

Despite the historical circumstances in which they find themselves, the success of Nijera Kori attests to the fact that the poor have the capacity to mobilize, advocate for their rights, and in so doing, improve their social and material conditions. In recognizing this collective agency of the poor, Nijera Kori rejects the dominant service-delivery approach of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in favor of conscientization and mobilization, in order to support the poor in realizing their own collective capabilities (Kabeer 2003). Conscientization refers to a social mobilization approach that was used widely in Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s, similar to that of Paulo Freire, which focuses on developing “the potential of poor people to challenge structural inequalities through education, organization, and mobilization” (Lewis 1997, 35).

I will begin this chapter with an overview of Nijera Kori and its history, contextualized in relation to the shift in development agendas through which microcredit programs have flourished in Bangladesh. This overview will be followed by a discussion of the moral economy of the Bangladeshi peasantry and the agrarian political economy within which both Nijera Kori and microcredit programs operate. I will then offer three important tenets of this moral economy, as well as particular strategies for organizing and advocacy employed by Nijera Kori landless groups, which offer a substantive alternative to the strategies promoted by microcredit programs.

Nijera Kori and Its History

Despite its small organizational capacity, Nijera Kori works in 25 percent of Bangladesh’s sixty-four districts. Its active membership of almost 250,000 individuals does not do justice to the even more significant social and economic

impact of its presence on the wider population of each of the 1,323 villages in which it operates (Nijera Kori 2013). This membership is composed of women and men who depend on their own physical labor as their main source of livelihood—primarily agricultural wage laborers, sharecroppers, and marginal farmers.

As Naila Kabeer (2003) has written in her insightful history of the movement, Nijera Kori in its current manifestation was formed in 1980, when a group of rural community organizers for BRAC (today one of Bangladesh's largest microfinance agencies) broke away to join Nijera Kori. Dissatisfied with BRAC's increasing reliance on the service-delivery approach, which was then gaining strength in Bangladesh's development sector, in no small part through pressure from donors, these organizers left in order to pursue the awareness-raising and social-mobilization activities among the rural poor that had characterized their work during the recent postindependence period. Kabeer (2003, 2) writes, "The disaffected staff took with them a very different understanding of the developmental problems of Bangladesh, one which has since shaped the history and evolution of NK."

As an organization focused on social mobilization toward the achievement of rights for the rural poor, Nijera Kori offers a fundamentally different political-ideological paradigm than that of Bangladesh's microcredit providers, which is expressed in its unique programming goals and outcomes. These conflicting paradigms are demonstrative of a broader split in Bangladesh's NGO sector beginning in the 1980s, when the global rise of neoliberal development motivated a shift away from social mobilization programs and the critical politics that supported them (Kabeer 2003; Karim 2001; Lewis 1997).¹ The donor-motivated neoliberalization of the Bangladeshi NGO sector has driven the sector's institutionalization, depoliticization, and resulting expansion (Devine 2003; Feldman 2003), and this shift is exemplified by the remarkable rise of the country's microcredit industry (Cons and Paprocki 2010; Muhammad 2009). Nijera Kori's continued commitment to an ideology of social mobilization made it unique within a dramatically changing development landscape (Kabeer, Mahmud, and Castro 2010; Lewis 2011). According to Kabeer (2003, 40), Nijera Kori remains the foremost example of an approach that "focuses on structural inequalities in society and seeks to explain how dominance and oppression are maintained. Change is seen to come about as the result of systemic conflict and the goal is to ensure radical transformation of the system itself rather than

reforms that leave these inequalities intact.” While Nijera Kori focuses on mitigating the structural inequalities that it sees as the source of poverty, many scholars of microcredit have suggested that microcredit programs, in fact, rely on these inequalities to ensure their own continued success (Fernando 1997; Karim 2011b; Rankin 2001; Paprocki 2016).

Nijera Kori pursues systemic transformation by building what it calls the “collective capabilities” of its members, which Kabeer (2003, 39) explains as “their ability to mobilise as rights-bearing citizens on their own behalf.” The concept of collective capabilities recognizes that true “development” can only be realized through the political empowerment of citizens in deliberation, debate, and active mobilization toward achieving the kind of society in which they want to live (Basu 2010; Feldman and Gellert 2006). It entails what Peter Evans (2002, 55) refers to as the “messy and continuous involvement of the citizenry in the setting of economic priorities.” This kind of change requires the provision of something much more intangible than financial and other social services that seek to fill in where markets, the state, and “good governance” have failed (Li 2009). It requires the provision of information, forums for dialogue and exchange, and training and mobilization to enable people to be the engaged citizens they aspire to be, undermining the very nature of neoliberalism with its emphasis on separating the political from the economic.

The centerpiece of Nijera Kori’s conscientization activities is a training program through which members of Nijera Kori’s landless collectives are provided with issue- and skill-based trainings lasting between three and ten days. Issue-based trainings are tailored to specific local concerns, often based on direct requests from local groups, and include topics such as “Land and Women,” “Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Guarantees,” and “Land Laws and Management Systems.” These trainings also often focus on very pressing community-based issues, such as dowries, child marriage, and domestic violence. Through the trainings, participants work together, along with Nijera Kori’s staff trainers, to identify local problems, examine their causes and impacts, and then determine proper courses of action to address them. Skill-based trainings cover topics such as leadership development, participatory planning, management of cooperative economic projects, and how to access information from government and NGO agencies through Bangladesh’s Right to Information Act. The ultimate goal of these trainings is to develop autonomous landless organizations that are able to mobilize independently in response to collectively identified

problems. Social mobilization and consciousness are also facilitated through cultural activities such as songs and street theater performances depicting social and economic injustices in a variety of different forums, from public markets to major cultural festivals. These performances provide a platform for Nijera Kori members to engage their wider communities in dialogue about the possibilities for social and economic transformation. Thus, Nijera Kori's model for transformative change rests on the development of the collective capability of landless groups to actively deliberate about their shared values and, based on this deliberation, to collectively pursue social and economic justice.

Agrarian Moral Economies

In order to understand Nijera Kori, the politics of its opposition to microcredit, and the substantive alternative it offers, I draw on the concept of "moral economy," which has been employed in a variety of forms by scholars of agrarian studies. The contemporary popularity of this concept can be attributed to British historian E. P. Thompson (1971), who used it to refer to the repertoires of resistance and notions of justice and traditional rights drawn on by the urban poor during food riots in eighteenth-century England. In 1976 James Scott took up the concept of moral economy in the rural context to examine the notion of the right to subsistence among Southeast Asian peasantries. In her lucid analysis of "agrarian moral economies," Wendy Wolford (2005, 245) defines moral economies as "both the expression of and production of a social group's explicitly normative frameworks outlining the 'proper' organization of society and division of (what are perceived as) scarce resources. They contain ideological elements and are historically and spatially situated in concrete material contexts, as is any understanding of ideology, but moral economies go beyond the realm of ideas to incorporate relationships and actions specifically those which pertain to resource use."² In this sense, moral economies represent collective, normative frameworks of justice and rights, and they often govern norms for social organization and production relations in rural communities. Following Scott, "moral economy" has continued to be an important conceptual framework for recognizing not only peasant understandings of traditional rights and entitlements, but also impacts of development processes on the preservation and fulfillment of these norms (Edelman 2005; Sivarama-krishnan 2005; Watts 1983).

NIJERA KORI AND THE MORAL ECONOMY
OF THE BANGLADESHI PEASANT

The concept of moral economy highlights some of Nijera Kori's key tenets: the recognition of historical inequity, the need for subsistence security, and the right to continue being agriculturalists. These three precepts are foundational to Nijera Kori's work, both methodologically and ideologically. They form the backdrop for a rights-based approach driven by the belief that structural transformation and the mitigation of poverty and injustice can only be achieved through collective struggle and political empowerment.

By invoking moral economy, I do not mean to suggest that Bangladeshi villages are havens of egalitarianism. Intense stratification and harsh clientelism continue to be the rule (Hart 1988; Van Schendel 1982; Westergaard and Hosain 2005). However, the work of Nijera Kori and the landless collectivities of which it is composed suggests that empowering people with historically and geographically contextualized understandings of collectively recognized rights and obligations holds the greatest promise for generating political mobilization toward structural change and the political enfranchisement of the most marginalized (Mohanty 1991).

Moreover, drawing attention to these people as peasants who play an active role in agrarian economies is critical to attainment of their rights. Indeed, their lack of private land rights would lead many academics and policy makers to categorize these people not as peasants, but as workers, a classification that would imply their superfluousness to agrarian economies (Akram-Lodhi, Haroon, and Kay 2009). The distinction carries significant implications with regard to rural politics and development regimes in the region. It entails recognition of a history about which microcredit practitioners are wholly silent, that is, the history of successive colonial regimes, which exacerbated poverty and inequality in the region. In particular, the Permanent Settlement Act, passed under British rule in 1793, codified a distinct development regime that dispossessed agriculturalists by giving the rights to all lands to elite rural gentry, resulting in substantial exploitation through an extensive system of sub-infeudation (Boyce 1987; Iqbal 2010; Van Schendel 1982, 2009). The legacy of this land tenure regime is high rates of rural poverty and landlessness. Today, approximately 48 percent of the rural population is functionally landless (owning less than 0.05 acres of land; World Bank 2002). Thus, landlessness has historically been a central political concern for the poor in rural areas in Bengal. Agrarian communities in the

area that is now Bangladesh have struggled repeatedly for the right to a peasant livelihood for smallholders and landless people alike (Cooper 1988; Hashmi 1992; Van Schendel 1982).

HISTORICAL INJUSTICE

An important element of Nijera Kori's alternative to microcredit is the difference in its interpretation of historical injustice from that of neoliberal development. Nijera Kori's approach and ideology are motivated by a particular historical analysis, which understands that poverty is a product of historical inequality and that this inequality requires not only redress for those who have suffered, but also obligates those who have benefited. This analysis is fundamental to the moral economy of the peasant in which obligations to assist those lower in the class hierarchy are not seen as "charity" because the poor are entitled to such assistance (Scott 1976).

Nijera Kori's analysis is directly at odds with the neoliberal approach of microcredit, which is inimical to the idea of "charity," either as social services delivered by NGOs or as social safety net mechanisms provided by the government. In contrast to the historical analysis motivating Nijera Kori's approach, microcredit programs operate by abstracting from the historical context in which a particular agrarian political economy has developed (Taylor 2012). As a result, "class differences are reduced to an unfortunate legacy of an insufficiently neoliberal past" (Wolford 2005, 257).

Given this analysis of historical injustice, as well as the awareness that these historical patterns continue to shape and perpetuate the power structures within rural communities, Nijera Kori landless groups have established "watch committees" throughout all of their working areas that are responsible for monitoring rights violations on specific issues, including education, health, natural resources, development and governance, fundamentalism, and gender. These committees, which are composed of elected members of local landless groups, gather information about rights violations and work together with landless groups to address these concerns. The work of the watch committees thus promotes accountability for the fulfillment of rights in rural communities, ensuring justice for even the most marginal populations.

Another example of Nijera Kori's efforts to directly address historical injustices is the movement's multiplatform campaign for land reform, which seeks to gain access to land for landless and marginal farmers. The majority of

Bangladesh's landless poor work as sharecroppers or agricultural day laborers, livelihoods that are fraught with insecurity and exploitation. Sharecroppers pay anywhere between one-third to two-thirds of their earnings as rent for the land they farm, and day laborers often earn even less. Thus, land access is a key concern for the rural poor. In recognition of the historically inequitable land distribution in the region, Bangladesh's constitution includes a provision for the distribution of common *khas* lands among the landless. Due to government and elite corruption and limited oversight of the mechanisms that might actually carry out this distribution, however, this right is rarely fulfilled in practice. Nijera Kori has had tremendous success in campaigning to address these deficiencies through a range of advocacy and mobilization activities. Land-reform priorities include overhauling land-use and sharecropping tenancy-rights policies, implementing the legal land ceiling and redistributing excess lands, and ensuring accountability and eliminating corruption in the distribution of *khas* lands. In addition to advocacy work, landless groups have also had great success in gaining access to agricultural land through direct agitation and squatting campaigns, establishing their rights to land access through occupation and settlement (Adnan 2011). While the World Bank envisions land reform in Bangladesh through the provision of microcredit to small farmers (Khan 2004), Nijera Kori's land-reform campaigns are grounded in both a fundamental belief in resource equity and the conviction that people should receive that to which they are entitled.

SECURITY AND SAFETY NETS

At its most basic level, the moral economy of the peasant is grounded in a simple belief in the universal right to survival (Scott 1976). An important corollary to this belief is the right to access social safety nets when the security of this survival is threatened. Though microcredit may in some cases offer the possibility of increased cash profits, it also displaces many of the social safety nets that ensure individual and collective security. For example, most microcredit programs in Bangladesh describe their mandatory savings deposits as social safety net mechanisms, but borrowers explain that they are in fact used to collateralize loans, as opposed to providing security for borrowers. In addition, most borrowers report never having access to these savings after they are deposited, even in cases of loan default or family crisis. At the same time, weekly loan payments and mandatory savings have supplanted contributions to

community savings mechanisms that formerly provided a safety net in cases of individual and community crisis (Cons and Paprocki 2010).

For Nijera Kori members and others among the poorest, having a reliable safety net is a pivotal concern: "For those at the margin, an *insecure* poverty is far more painful and explosive than poverty alone" (Scott 1976, 34). Nijera Kori responds to this threat against social security mechanisms by preserving traditional social safety nets (where microcredit is eroding them), mobilizing landless groups to demand from the government access to social safety nets already guaranteed, and establishing new social safety nets through social arrangements grounded in traditional norms of collective support and reciprocal exchange.

Although the Bangladeshi state guarantees social security for all of its citizens, the provision of this right to a broad swath of the population has been steadily eroded by a combination of neoliberal austerity and government corruption. Whereas microcredit supporters and agencies propose to replace state functions with market-based development strategies, Nijera Kori actively campaigns for government transparency and accountability in meeting its commitments to its citizens. In recent years, Nijera Kori groups have used the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which was enacted in 2009, to promote this transparency and accountability. The RTI Act gives citizens the right to request the disclosure of information of public interest from public authorities, including government and NGO officials. The law was designed to allow citizens to hold the government accountable. Not surprisingly, bureaucracy, misinformation, and corruption make the law and its usage difficult to navigate. Moreover, the government's own primary channel for disseminating information about the RTI Act is the Internet, resulting in extremely limited access among Bangladesh's rural population (Goswami 2013). Accordingly, Nijera Kori began providing workshops to its members in 2010 to help them understand and use the RTI Act effectively. In addition, Nijera Kori landless groups have begun actively sharing information about the act within their communities through song and street theater performances.

Through training and collective deliberation, Nijera Kori landless groups have begun using the RTI Act to request information concerning the provision of social security entitlements and have already had success not only with increasing government transparency, but also with pressuring government agencies to deliver on these groups' rightful entitlements. In one case, Nijera Kori members in the village of Charlaxmi successfully used the RTI Act to expose official corruption in the distribution of poor widows' benefit cards,

resulting in the distribution of the benefits to thirty-five eligible widows who had previously not received the allowance. In Gangni Upazila, landless group members used the act to expose corruption and bribe taking in the implementation of the Maternal Health Voucher Scheme, through which poor pregnant mothers are entitled to health care worth approximately US\$100; as a result, twenty eligible pregnant mothers who had previously been denied were able to access health benefits. In Royganj Upazilla, landless group members used the act to demand access to land records for the Sonaidanga reservoir, a common body of water that had been illegally occupied and enclosed by local elites. As a result of this information request and accompanying mobilization, the enclosures were removed and the area has become accessible for fishing and rice planting, thus providing livelihood opportunities for around three hundred fishermen and their families. While individually these figures represent small victories, the cumulative effects of Nijera Kori's organizing through the RTI Act are significant. They represent not only tangible successes in achieving rights where they had previously been denied, but also the empowerment of communities to organize collectively to bring about social change.

In addition to advocating for social security entitlements from the government, Nijera Kori groups also promote greater collective security through group savings accounts that are administered by each landless group individually. The rate of contribution is determined through consensus, based on the financial ability of all members. Groups take full responsibility for managing the accounts, with bookkeeping assistance from Nijera Kori staff as necessary. Groups take responsibility for deciding whether and how to distribute these funds throughout the calendar year and have decided to use group savings for a range of different individual and collective development and welfare activities. Often, funds are distributed for community development projects determined by the group, such as repairing school buildings and roads, digging and cleaning common-property canals and ponds, and offering support for group members' educational and medical needs. Funds are also often used for mobilization activities, including additional trainings and workshops, cultural performances, protests, and legal aid. Finally, many groups reserve a portion of their savings for redistribution among members' families during temporary crises, such as unemployment, agricultural problems, and medical emergencies. The availability of this group savings prevents members from needing to rely on microcredit loans in times of extreme hardship. Whereas contributions to savings programs administered through microcredit programs are considered

by borrowers to function as additional interest payments, collective savings among landless groups provide a much-needed source of social security for landless group members.

THE RIGHT TO CONTINUE BEING AGRICULTURALISTS

In recent years, an increasingly important tenet of the moral economy of the peasantry has been recognized as the “right to continue being agriculturalists” (Edelman 2005; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Wittman 2009). Numerous scholars of agrarian studies have examined the processes by which this right has come under acute threat from a neoliberal developmentalist vision promoting an “exit from agriculture” and unprecedented depeasantization (Araghi 2009a, 2009b; Glassman 2006; Li 2009; McMichael 2006; Watts 2009).

Microcredit advocates have long claimed that this intervention is the key to rural development, yet in practice microcredit discriminates against agricultural livelihoods (Bateman 2012c; Harper 2007) and drives agrarian dispossession (Taylor 2011). In Bangladesh in particular, the World Bank advises that the path to “middle-income status” necessitates the implementation of policies to shift masses of the rural poor into garment-factory jobs in Dhaka. The World Bank’s promotion of microcredit programs must thus be understood in relation to this rural development policy framework, about which a recent World Bank report explained, “Improving rural productivity by modernizing agriculture and diversifying nonfarm activities, in order to free up manpower for use in more productive activities, is also essential for growth” (Muzzini and Aparicio 2013, 48). The hostility toward agriculturalists is demonstrated by the requirement (held by every major microcredit provider in Bangladesh) that borrowers begin making loan payments immediately, the week after borrowing, with no regard for agricultural cycles. Microcredit borrowers in Bangladesh express resentment toward this system, suggesting that an alternative loan repayment structure offering a grace period between planting and harvesting would facilitate agricultural investment among marginal farmers (Paprocki 2016).

In contradistinction to these lending practices of microcredit agencies and the agrarian transformations they promote, Nijera Kori’s vision of aspirational rural life is centered on the fulfillment of citizenship rights and sustainable agrarian production among all sectors of the rural population. The organization promotes this alternative vision for the economic future of rural communities in Bangladesh by promoting the rights of farmers to continue agricultural

production and by creating new opportunities for collective economic well-being among its membership.

One example of this commitment is Nijera Kori's campaign against export-oriented commercial shrimp cultivation in Bangladesh's southern coastal areas. Since the 1980s, the neoliberal promotion of shrimp farming for export has resulted in marginal farmers being dispossessed of their land and means of livelihood through ecological devastation, elite land grabbing, and the unrestrained conversion of land previously used for food production and consumption into land used for export-commodity production (Adnan 2011; Guimaraes 1989; Paprocki and Cons 2014). Microcredit programs in these areas promote shrimp farming as a small business opportunity, despite clear evidence that the conversion of farmland to shrimp ponds displaces sharecroppers and day laborers and results in food insecurity among the poor. Nijera Kori's campaign against shrimp farming aims to protect the right of small and landless farmers to keep their land and livelihoods, continue producing food to benefit local communities, and ensure that profits from local production stay in local communities.

Another way in which Nijera Kori defends the right of peasants to continue being agriculturalists is through the promotion and facilitation of cooperative economic projects among its members. Even as Nijera Kori protects the rights of its members to continue agricultural production, the organization recognizes that the traditional agrarian economic structure is inequitable and disadvantageous to the poorest members of society. By undertaking cooperative agricultural projects, however, members of landless groups have been able to increase their family incomes by growing the scale of their agricultural activities through shared risk, collective economies of scale, and collective security. Nijera Kori provides training to interested groups in order to support the management of large-scale economic activities and encourage practices such as collective investment and the greater inclusion of women. In 2012 seventeen landless organizations came together in the adjacent Nabagram and Bhatir Tek villages to engage in joint cultivation on khas land to which they had collectively gained access. This collective cultivation was particularly significant in this region, where day laborers and sharecroppers have traditionally been forced into exploitative economic arrangements through which they lose approximately 80 percent of their crops to landlords and moneylenders. These groups in Nabagram and Bhatir Tek, totaling 318 men and women, took the initiative to use group savings to purchase a tractor and cultivate 177 acres of

land. In addition to acquiring a tractor for their continued collective use, the group made a profit from their first rice harvest of over 550,000 Bangladeshi taka, approximately US\$7,500, some of which was invested into a joint account for the following year's harvest, while each participating family received fifteen maunds of rice for their personal consumption. Nijera Kori estimates that the profits from this harvest alone will ensure the food security of participating families for up to five months.

Conclusion

An examination of Nijera Kori, the work of its landless group members, and the politics of its rejection of microcredit not only lend support to the growing body of criticisms of the microcredit model, but also suggest an alternative model for understanding and assessing rural notions of justice and exploitation. As Scott (1976, 159) explains, "Disputes over what is exploitative and what is not are appeals to a normative tradition and not matters to be settled by empirical inquiry." Such an assertion might give pause to those who are enthusiastic about microcredit research centering on massive randomized control trials and quantifiable metrics such as "social capital," from which the voices of the communities and individuals who are the supposed beneficiaries are conspicuously absent (Cons and Paprocki 2008; Maclean 2010). Such empirical inquiry aside, peasant perceptions of exploitation through microcredit are significant and should not be overlooked. Examining microcredit in relation to the moral economy of the peasantry facilitates an understanding of the historical and ongoing causes of exploitation, as well as the collective capacity of local communities to work against it through political struggle.

While Nijera Kori's approach and accomplishments are extraordinary in a country where social mobilization has taken a backseat to an unprecedented saturation of microcredit programs and unbridled enthusiasm for "bottom billion capitalism" (Roy 2010, 2012), the organization is not unique in its rejection of the impacts that microcredit and the development project (of which it is a remarkable example) are having in rural communities throughout the Global South (McMichael 2004; Rist 1997). Indeed, rights-based peasant movements are gaining traction around the world and providing social and economic alternatives to the neoliberal model of capitalist agriculture and development (Edelman 1999; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; McMichael 2008; Patel 2007; Wolford 2010). Collectively, the work of these

movements “includes re-envisioning the conditions necessary to develop sustainable and democratic forms of social reproduction” (McMichael 2009, 308). Individually, each struggle takes place in response to very particular political concerns and trajectories. The recognition that microcredit “doesn’t work” (Bateman 2010), along with the rejection of capitalist models of development that such a recognition may entail, necessitates a closer examination of these diverse trajectories. Nijera Kori offers one such powerful example of the way in which local communities are imagining and constructing alternative agrarian futures.

Notes

1. “Social mobilization” refers to the explicit political contestations and rural community organizing that characterized much of the work of NGOs in Bangladesh’s immediate postindependence period.
2. Wolford’s use of “agrarian moral economies” represents a slight departure from other usages in the agrarian studies tradition, in the sense that Wolford examines multiple, competing moral economies that exist in a single community, reflecting divergent claims and legitimating narratives based on diverse collective norms and traditions. I avoid analyzing a competing “agrarian moral economy” of microcredit because while microcredit agencies in Bangladesh do regularly refer to liberal rights frameworks, they avoid appeals to traditional rights or local notions of social justice, instead relying on legitimating narratives rooted in decidedly nonlocal neoliberal conceptions of individual (as opposed to collective) empowerment. Yet this avoidance does not rule out the possibility of a global neoliberal moral economy bolstering the microcredit movement. Ananya Roy and others explore such a possibility in a recent special issue of the journal *Public Culture*, in which Roy (2012, 106) argues that “bottom billion humanity is becoming the grounds of global ethics.” Marcus Taylor (2012, 601) suggests a similar possibility in his examination of the legitimizing rhetoric of “financial inclusion,” which he describes as “a discourse that recasts micro-finance as . . . a global moral imperative.”