

Debate on future of farm policy continues

NCC calls for better agricultural planning

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AMMAN — National Consultative Council (NCC) members Monday called on the Ministry of Agriculture to adopt an agricultural policy based on scientific research and planning.

The proposal was voiced by about 20 speakers during the council's regular session in which agricultural policy in Jordan was discussed. The discussion, which began last Thursday, focused on a report presented to the council by Minister of Agriculture Marwan Dudin two weeks ago.

Members who spoke at Monday's session expressed their appreciation for a reply given by Prime Minister Mudar Badran last Tuesday in which he stated that "the government will seriously consider all proposals and recommendations submitted by the council members on agricultural policy."

They also supported a government decision, announced last week by the prime minister, to rent state lands to small farmers with the aim of planting 150 thousand tonnes of wheat. This move, they pointed out, will contribute towards achieving "food security" in Jordan.

Lack of planning

Most of the speakers criticised the commercial principles on which most agricultural policies and practices, whether in the state or the private sector, are based.

Lack of proper planning was also conceived by many members as a major source of problems in agriculture.

In particular they stressed the need for a stronger and more effective role to be played by the Ministry of Agriculture. The ministry, some members claimed, does not set up a definite period to solve agricultural problems.

The shortcomings in agriculture, they added, have been accumulating for years, but no specific practical steps have been taken by the ministry to curb them.

The speakers again warned against the grave consequences of building on fertile land. The government, it was pointed out, is also taking part along with the private sector in such construction work.

Land salination

The salination of fertile land in the Jordan Valley was also raised by members. Ten per cent of the land in the valley has been rendered useless due to the rise in the saline content of water which was caused by negligence in adopting effective measures to rid the soil of excess salts during periods of high rain fall.

The preservation and development of land in the Israeli occupied territories was also emphasised by several speakers. In addition to the Israeli policy of the expropriation of Arab land and the building of settlements, the Israelis impede Arab farmers from the proper exploitation of their lands.

Insufficient material support by Arab states to these farmers on West Bank also contribute to this deterioration in agriculture, they said.

A basic reason for the inconsistency of Arab support stems from the strains that have emerged between Arab countries, it was pointed out.

Rainfed areas neglected

As for the East Bank, members added that rainfed land constitutes 90 per cent of the country's agricultural land and as such is not fully exploited by the government. Soil erosion, as a result of flooding especially of the Zarqa River, is another factor that damages agricultural land, it was pointed out.

The land on the banks of the Zarqa River, however, suffer from another dangerous problem. The Zarqa River has been contaminated rendering it unsuitable for irrigating the fertile land which surrounds it.

The issue of financing agricultural projects and increasing the sources of financial support were also discussed. It was even said that 33 per cent of the loans given by "a specified agricultural credit corporation" were granted to 2.6 per cent of its borrowers.

Moreover, it was argued that the Ministry of Agriculture's ample funds were obviously not allocated properly. The budgets of the ministry, the Jordan Valley Authority (JVA), and the other agricultural corporations show "a huge amount of money", one of the speakers noted.

The 1981 - 1985 five year plan has allocated JD 234 million for agriculture and JD 521 million for irrigation and water resources. Thus the real problem lies in "the agricultural authorities policies and practices and not the lack of funds," it was argued.

Minister criticised

Members also criticised the report of the Minister for not focusing enough on the means of rendering financial support to the farmers and increasing the subsidy on agricultural products.

Protecting agricultural products, especially strategic products like wheat and meat, was emphasised as a major factor that will lead to an increase in the agricultural output.

Agriculture, it was pointed out, contributes a mere seven per cent



Members of the National Consultative Committee listened attentively during Monday's debate on agricultural policy in Jordan (Photo by Yousef Al Allan)

of Gross National Product (GNP)

The small contribution of agriculture to the GNP and its inability to cover the local needs were due to different reasons.

In addition to the wrong method of exploiting the land and water the need for mechanisation and the adoption of advanced techniques were listed as an important problem. Many private owners of land are not using the advanced methods available and poor farmers do not have the access to such methods and means. The need to secure technical guidance and skilled staff to supervise the agricultural was listed as another reason that hampers an increase in the output of agriculture.

Further impediment

Another impediment named was the shortage of labour power. Although this problem was discussed in length during last Tuesday's session, new reasons were explored by members to explain the insufficiencies of the labour force.

Widening gap

Poor public services and the widening gap between the standard of living in the villages and the cities forces people to emigrate from rural areas in search of work, thus deserting the land.

The high cost of production also discourages people from engaging in agriculture. The Ministry of Supply was partly blamed by several members for not guaranteeing a reasonable market price. Goods are being dumped on the market which severely hurt the local products which can not compete with the lower prices of some imported agricultural products. Moreover there is a big difference between the prices of exported manufactured goods and the agricultural products which make the living standards of the relatively poor farmers even lower.

Threat to food security

Furthermore, the relatively low production of agriculture poses a threat to "self sufficiency" and "food security" which Jordan aims to achieve. The above problems also apply to livestock and the poultry industry in Jordan. But in the case of the latter, it was pointed out, competition from exp-

orted frozen chickens and the lack of a large enough market has led to a stagnation in the poultry industry.

The livestock, however, suffers other problems. Lack of pasture land and the high price of fodder together with its poor quality hinders the development of livestock industry.

Livestock products, especially lamb, are unable to cope with the local demand. Imported meat, which is sold at cheaper prices, is used to compensate for the shortage of the local supply.

Members proposals

Members then made a number of proposals to improve agriculture and increase its productivity. Among the most significant were the followings:

-- that the ministry should assume a stronger and more effective role in the guidance of agriculture.

-- more coordination between all the agricultural cooperations under stricter ministerial supervision.

-- more coordination between the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Supply.

-- the establishment of an agricultural development bank.

-- the foundation of a Chamber of Agriculture.

-- the removal of government legislation that bans the usage of underground water in the north, and to use this water for agricultural purposes.

-- to build more dams on the river to prevent the erosion of the soil and to use the water more eff-

ectively for irrigation.

-- to improve public services in the rural areas.

-- that the government increase its financial support and subsidies to farmers and agricultural products.

-- to secure tractors and agricultural machinery for farmers to rent at reasonable rates from agricultural corporations.

-- to adopt a practical marketing policy to secure an outlet for local agricultural products, taking into consideration the European markets as a possible option.

-- to coordinate more closely with the Arab countries to increase financial support to the West Bank farmers, and to secure markets for the occupied Arab territories' agricultural output.

-- to expand the experience of the Jordan Valley to include other areas in the country.

-- to take practical measures to protect the local agricultural output.

The Minister of Agriculture Marwan Dudin then gave a brief speech in which he said discussion is vital for overcoming the sector's problem. He then thanked the NCC for opening "new dimensions" for the Ministry of Agriculture to explore.

Mr. Dudin added that he agreed with the speakers that agriculture is an integral part of the development policy in Jordan.

The council decided to refer the ministry's and the members' reports to the NCC's Agricultural Committee for a detailed study. The committee is expected to present its final proposals at a future session.