

# Upland farming enjoys period of revitalisation

By Anne Counsell  
Special to the Jordan Times

AMMAN — There is a lot of agricultural activity going on in the hilly, rain-fed areas of Jordan. Although not as visually dramatic as the acres of greenhouses to be found in the Jordan Valley, the Ministry of Agriculture's Highland Development Project is of considerable significance to the hundreds of small farmers who own rocky, sloping land without access to irrigation facilities.

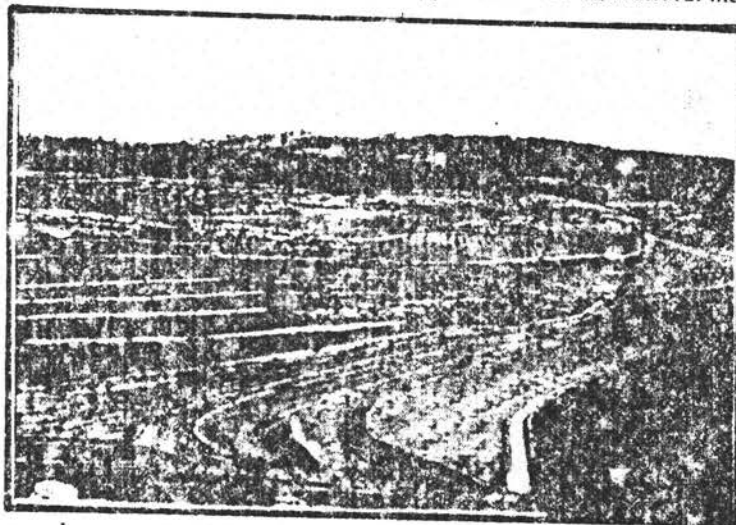
Economically these upland areas are important for Jordan as it is here that the country's olives, peaches, pears, grapes and plums are grown.

The idea of reclaiming and utilising the rocky upland areas that depend on rainfall for production is not a new one — the Ministry of Agriculture first started that project in 1965 and revitalised the scheme in 1980 following a slump in the 1970's.

Already results are evident in the Baiqa, Salt, Ajloun, Jerash and Irbid areas where the project operates and neatly terraced hillsides with rows of fruit trees contrast with the barren, stony ground that has not been utilised.

## Financial, food aid

Manager of the Highland Development Project, Mr. Ahmad Rimawi, told the Jordan Times



A whole hillside developed under the Highland Development Project showing terraces and fruit trees with forest trees on the hillsides

that the farmers who wish to participate in the scheme receive technical and financial assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as "food for work" from the World Food Programme (WFP) to help them with the establishment of the farm.

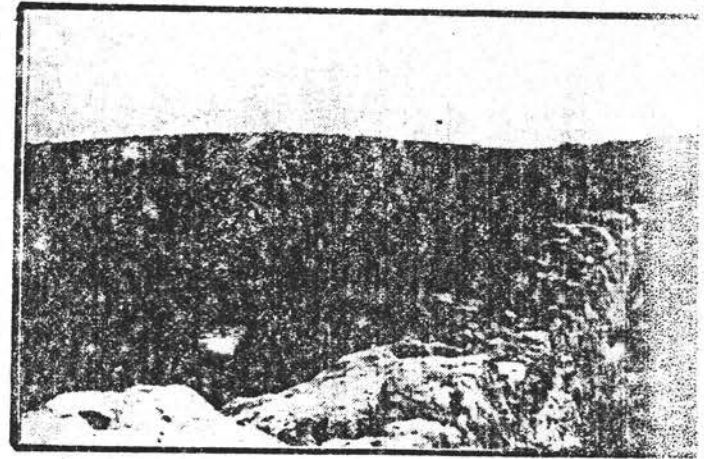
The WFP provides basic food commodities such as flour, sugar, skimmed milk and canned meat to give a nutritious diet whilst the farm is being established and the ministry supports the farmer in the costs of reclamation and fencing. The farmer also has access to soft loans from the Agriculture Credit Corporation (ACC) to cover costs of spraying and maintenance to tide him over until there are returns from the farm.

## Greater risks

Although the risks of farming in the upland areas are greater than in the Jordan Valley because of the reliance on rainfall for production, many farmers are convinced of the scheme — approximately 750 new sites were reclaimed last year alone.

Also, as the ministry encourages olive growing which is a traditional and established tree in low rainfall areas with good returns, the farmers find the scheme acceptable although it may take years to obtain returns.

Many small farmers in Jordan supplement their agricultural in-



Ploughing with horses, a phenomenon still common on fragmented land in the upland rainfed agricultural areas of Jordan.

come through other jobs.

Clearing the land of rocks and breaking them up to make stone terraces is actively encouraged by the ministry as not only does this improve the land but the terraces force the farmer to employ contour ploughing which reduces soil erosion and increases the water retention capacity of the soil.

Ploughing with tractors is increasing but many farmers still use a horse-drawn plough for inaccessible areas and as land is fragmented this ploughing method is often more practical.

## Fruit trees

The small farm areas in the upland regions are more suited to fruit trees as fragmented land does not affect production of fruits as much as cereals or vegetables.

An increasing trend in recent years has been the growing of stone-fruit trees such as peaches, plums and cherries in the upland areas with an annual rainfall of over 500 mm. This has been due to the more rapid returns for farmers of such trees — harvests and economic returns can be obtained from stone fruits after five years whereas it may take up to 10 years before a farmer receives benefits from olive trees.

Compared to 20 years ago, the area of stone-fruit trees under cultivation in the Ajloun and Salt areas has increased ten-fold while in the same region the increase in

olive production has only increased by three times in the same time period.

## Olives, grapes

However, in areas where annual rainfall is less than 400 mm, the ministry encourages olive and grape production which is suited to such dry conditions. In spite of competition from imported olives, farmers have a monopoly on the olive market as more acidic taste of locally produced olives is preferred by Jordanians and both the olives and the olive oil is still a basic component of the country's diet.

Olive and grape seedlings available at 25-30 per cent of normal retail price from the Ministry of Agriculture stations in Baiqa and Jerash where local varieties are grafted onto disease resistant foreign varieties.

To date approximately 55 per cent of the target area of 41,000 dunums has been successfully reclaimed through the implementation of the Highland Development Project, resulting not only in increased production but also social and economic improvements for the rural population.

The loans from the ACC allow farmers to build houses as well as improve their land which helps reduce the rural migration. In support from the WFP has had between 5-7,000 families establishing farms.

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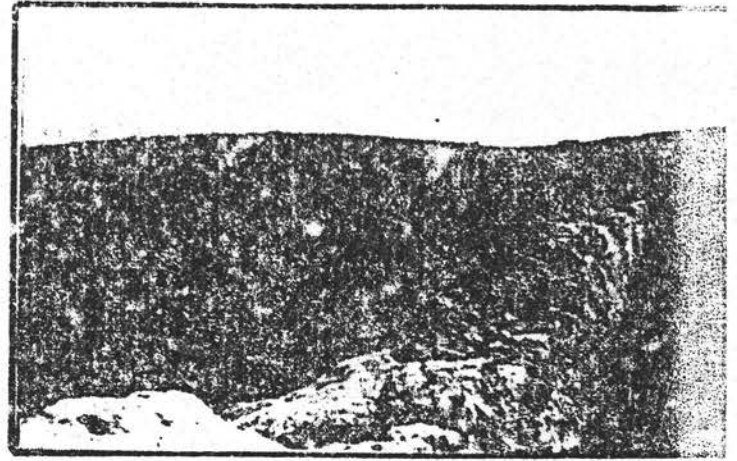
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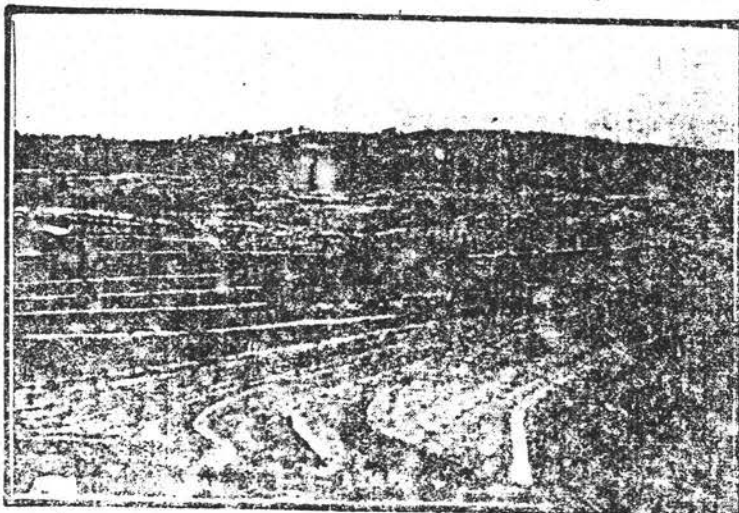
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Olive and grape seedlings are available at 25-30 per cent of the normal retail price from the Ministry of Agriculture stations in Baq'a and Jerash where local varieties are grafted onto disease resistant foreign varieties.

To date approximately 50 per cent of the target area of 400,000 dunums has been successfully reclaimed through the implementation of the Highland Development Project, resulting not only in increased production but also social and economic improvements for the rural population.

The loans from the ACC enable farmers to build houses as well as improve their land which helps to reduce the rural migration. Support from the WFP has benefited between 5-7,000 families in establishing farms.



A whole hillside developed under the Highland Development Project showing terraces and fruit trees with forest trees on the hilltops