

AGRARIAN REFORM  
AND RURAL POVERTY,  
EGYPT, 1952-1975

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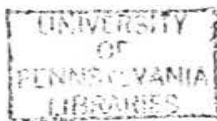
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PREFACE

The present study is part of the on-going research of the Rural Employment Policies Branch of the World Employment Programme on the alternative forms of organisation for rural development. During last year, research activities were concentrated on the determination of the effects of rural development policies within the existing organisational framework in South and South-East Asia. Such a framework is characterised by an unequal distribution of land ownership and an absence of major land reforms. The attempts made to develop agriculture within such a framework led in most cases to increased inequality.<sup>1</sup>

As a logical follow-up we plan to investigate alternative organisational forms within which agricultural development could be pursued without leading to a polarisation of income and wealth and increasing poverty. To achieve this objective, we shall study a large variety of experiences ranging from systems of communal land use to egalitarian agrarian reform in the context of private enterprise and the "intermediate" experiences of co-operatives. We propose to analyse a number of case studies in each of these categories to evaluate their role as vehicles for rural development in the contemporary Third World. In particular, each experience will be assessed in terms of its contribution to: (a) reducing poverty; (b) generating surplus; and (c) increasing production and employment. Egypt has been chosen as typical of the "intermediate" variety.

One of the most permanent features of life in rural Egypt has been the poverty of the mass of peasants, the fellahin. A basic factor accounting for rural poverty, in Egypt as in most land-scarce developing countries, is the unequal distribution of productive assets, notably land. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the enthronement of land reform policies as the instrument of increasing equality and decreasing poverty. The successive agrarian reforms introduced in Egypt in 1952, 1960 and 1969 have usually been cited as "successful experiments". Yet, after a quarter of a century of agrarian reform, the Programme of National Action admits that "The pattern of daily life of our peasants, who form the majority of our people, has not fundamentally changed neither in the methods and means of production, accommodation, food and health nor in education and culture". It is the purpose of this paper to appraise the impact of agrarian reform on rural Egypt. We shall begin by a brief survey of the pre-reform agrarian system, assess the effect of agrarian reform on the distribution of land and income in general

<sup>1</sup> ILO, Poverty and Landlessness in Rural Asia, Geneva, 1977.

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and its effect on the problem of rural poverty in particular, and, finally, we shall attempt an appraisal of the "supervised co-operatives", the most important institution created by the Egyptian agrarian reform. The principal question here is to what extent did the new institutional set-up succeed as an alternative form of agricultural organisation. In other words, to what extent did the co-operative system succeed in changing the character of the predominantly capitalist agriculture which developed in Egypt since the establishment of private land ownership in the second half of the 19th century? To answer this question, we shall first begin with a brief survey of the evolution, objectives and structure of the co-operative system in order to define the nature of co-operatives and to chart the elaborate institutional set-up created by the successive agrarian reform laws. Secondly, we shall draw on available data and case studies of individual co-operatives in an attempt to examine the impact of the co-operative system and the various policies it introduced on resource allocation, the transfer of agricultural surplus, the process of differentiation and the change in the socio-political power structure in the Egyptian village. Finally, we shall conclude with some remarks on the present-day crisis of the co-operative system.

It is impossible to list here all the people who helped during the preparation of this manuscript. I am sure that they will recognise their efforts in this work. I cannot however fail to thank Keith Griffin, Aziz Khan, Eddy Lee, Robert Mabro, Asem Dessouki and Mohamed Abu Mandour for their valuable comments.

Samir Radwan

Geneva,  
10 August 1977.

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