

# ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAND REFORM AND RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION IN IRAN, 1966-1976

M.G. Majd

THE year 1992 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the launching of the Iranian land reform (1962-1971), possibly the most significant event in the agrarian history of modern Iran. Despite three decades of research and debate on the subject, this effort remains a source of controversy. Until recently, much of the debate centered around the "rural destruction and destitution thesis." It was argued that land reform in Iran excluded a large number of peasants and gave insufficient land to the remainder. The subsequent agricultural neglect and anti-rural policies resulted in peasant impoverishment, rural destitution, and mass migration to the cities that contributed directly to the revolution.<sup>1</sup>

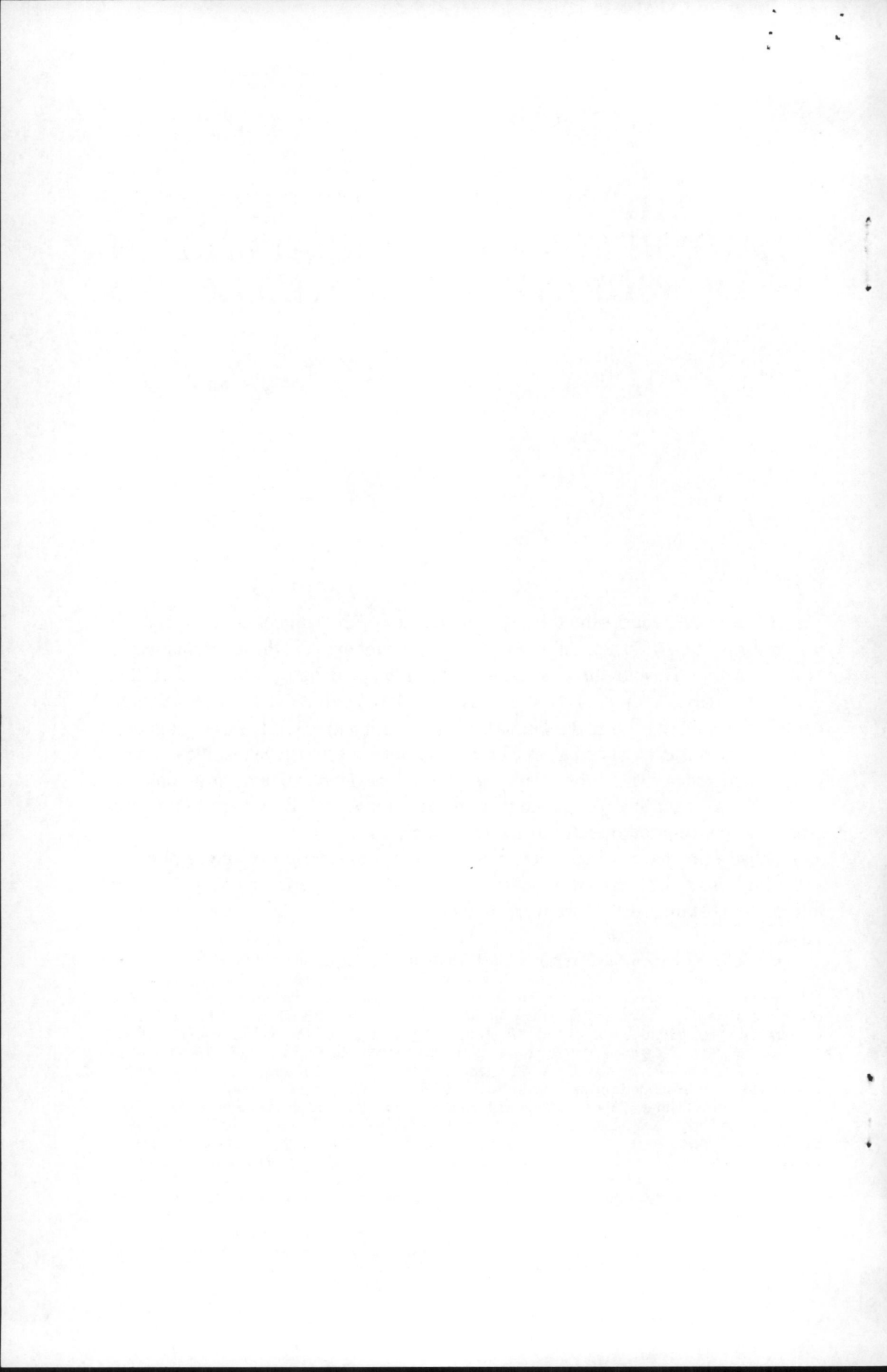
Those who challenge this view maintain that land reform had been extensive and that Iran's post-reform agricultural growth was superior when judged by international standards.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they argued, contrary to a widespread view,

---

1. A large number of authors can be cited. The following is a partial list: Eric Hooglund, *Land and Revolution in Iran, 1960-1980* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran, 1926-1979* (New York: New York University Press, 1981); Ali Farazmand, *The State, Bureaucracy, and Revolution in Modern Iran: Agrarian Reform and Regime Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Robert E. Looney, *The Economic Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982); Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).

2. Ahmad Ashraf, "State and Agrarian Relations before and after the Iranian Revolution, 1960-1990," in Farhad Kazemi and John Waterbury, eds., *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991), pp. 277-311; Shaul Bakhash, "Iran," *American Historical Review* 96 (1991); Jahangir Amuzegar, *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution: The Pahlavis' Triumph and Tragedy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); Massoud Karshenas, *Oil, State, and Industrialization in Iran* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Elias

Mohammad Gholi Majd is a fellow of the Middle East Center and a visiting lecturer in the Department of Regional Science, University of Pennsylvania. He is also an adjunct assistant professor at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University.



Iran's agricultural economy had been a beneficiary of substantial protection and public investment. Because the available data now demonstrates that there was a combination of rising agricultural production by peasants, expanding nonagricultural employment, and rising consumer expenditures in rural areas, the rural destruction thesis is not as widely held as it was previously. Nevertheless, discussion of the nature and consequences of land reform continues with vigor.

A current debate centers on the historical role of land reform in the promotion of capitalism and industrialization. Iran's land reform is viewed by Marxist scholars in the same context as the eighteenth-century English enclosure movements that resulted in dispossession of the peasantry, their conversion to wage labor, subsequent migration, and proletarianization.<sup>3</sup> In this paradigm, enclosure-type land reforms that result in peasant dispossession appear necessary for the development of industrial capitalism. While the relevance of such an approach to Iran's land reform has been questioned by some scholars, it has been used by others as a basis for explaining rural-urban migration in Iran during 1956–1976.<sup>4</sup> In comparing land reform in Iran with the English enclosures, it has been argued that land reform resulted in large-scale peasant dispossession and that the ensuing development of capital-intensive agriculture led to rural unemployment, rising inequality, and created an environment in which the push factor was dominant over the pull factor in the decision to migrate. The push factor is thus seen to originate from land reform and the resulting inequality rather than from Malthusian pressures associated with rapid population growth. Describing the level of migration as a "massive migratory exodus," it is said that the presence of the "masses of migrant labor in the cities . . . provided the crucial momentum for the revolution of 1979."<sup>5</sup> In short, so the argument goes, dispossession and the proletarianization of the peasantry in Iran ultimately resulted in revolution.

In contrast to the above, other studies have concluded that the level of rural-urban migration during 1966–1976 was considerably smaller. After studying the causes of urbanization and the growth of the urban population, Nima Nattagh concluded that rural-urban migration accounted for only 35 percent of the

---

*Tuma, Economic and Political Change in the Middle East* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Book Publishers, 1987); Hassan Hakimian, "The Impact of the 1970s Oil Boom on Iranian Agriculture," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 15 (1988); Hossein Mahdavy, "Thirty Years of Change in a Village on the Ghazvin Plain," *Agah Book on Land and Rural Issues* (Tehran: Agah, 1361 [1982/83]), pp. 50–74, in Persian; M.G. Majd, "Land Reform Policies in Iran," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 69 (1987); M.G. Majd, "The Political Economy of Land Reform in Iran," *Land Use Policy* 8 (1991).

3. Bagher Momeni, *Land Question and Class Struggle in Iran* (Tehran: Peyvand, 1359 [1980/81]), in Persian; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987); Mohammad Javad Amid, *Agriculture, Poverty and Reform in Iran* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Hamid Mohtadi, "Rural Inequality and Rural-Push Versus Urban-Pull Migration: The Case of Iran, 1956–1976," *World Development* 18 (1990).

4. Ahmad Ashraf is a proponent of the former theory. Hamid Mohtadi is a proponent of the latter.

5. Mohtadi, "Rural Inequality," p. 837. Likewise, Katouzian portrays a moving picture of the proletarianized, impoverished, and noble peasant arriving "at the gates of the city, dispossessed of his land, deprived of his cultural identity. . . ." Homa Katouzian, "Oil Versus Agriculture: A Case of Dual Resource Depletion in Iran," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 15, p. 367.

increase, and that, "contrary to what many observers believe, [migration] has not been the most important source [of urbanization]."6 Similarly, an examination of the level of rural-urban migration by Massoud Karshenas concluded that "the commonly held view of associating the high degree of rural/urban migration during the latter half of the 1960s and early 1970s with the effects of the land reform programme, may be mistaken."7

In the debate on the size and causes of rural-urban migration, two issues need to be addressed. The first concerns the nature and consequences of land reform. For Iran's land reform to be comparable to the English enclosures, it must be shown that it resulted in widespread peasant expropriation. This article will first review the overall results of land reform and examine the findings of a micro-level study and the effects of land reform in six provinces. These studies reveal no empirical basis for the view that land reform resulted in peasant expropriation. Of particular interest are the results of land reform at the provincial level. Detailed studies published by the Islamic republic during the 1980s confirm that land reform was not only extensive in terms of the number of peasants receiving land, but also show that the amount of land received by the peasants was considerably greater than estimated, even by those who argued that land reform had been comprehensive. Moreover, the statistics show that the size of the landless population (*khoshneshin*, those who neither rented nor owned land) before land reform was considerably smaller than it has been indicated in much of the literature.

The economic consequences of land reform and the principal indicators of the rural economy, namely, the growth of the agricultural sector and the level of rural employment will next be examined. Since the growth of agricultural output and agricultural development policy are important determinants of rural conditions and have been neglected in the current debate on migration, an examination of Iran's post-reform agricultural policy and performance will follow. The growth of agricultural output, high by international standards, resulted in substantial productivity gains. Moreover, the statistics on rural and agricultural employment show that the rise in rural employment exceeded the combined increase in the labor force and the decline in agricultural employment and resulted in a decline in the unemployment rate.

A second issue concerns the actual level of rural-urban migration during the decade prior to the revolution. Given sharp disagreement over the magnitude of the rural exodus, an examination of these estimates and some of the sources of error that have led to an exaggeration of the level of rural-urban migration is essential. Finally, the age composition of rural migrants and the changing structure of rural settlements will be analyzed in the context of the origin of

6. Nima Nattagh, *Agriculture and Regional Development in Iran, 1962-1978* (Wisbech, UK: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1986), p. 61.

7. Karshenas, *Oil, State, and Industrialization in Iran*, p. 283.



rural-urban migration. Two important characteristics are identified: First, by far the largest migrant groups consisted of males aged 10–24 years. Second, rural-urban migrants after 1966 originated primarily from small and medium-sized villages, often located in semi-arid or mountainous regions. Both economic and educational opportunities were limited in these small settlements, hence an exodus of the young. Given the concentration of migrants from such villages and their youth, it follows that rising migration had little to do with land reform or the increase in rural inequality that is supposed to have followed land reform. Moreover, in contrast to the previous decade, post-1966 migration was small from larger villages, where the majority of the rural population lived—an indication that land reform may, in fact, have reduced the overall migration.

### *THE RESULTS OF LAND REFORM: SOME NEW EVIDENCE*

Since there appears to be agreement among scholars that one million peasants received land under phases 1 and 2 of the Iranian land reform, the discussion of the aggregate results here is mostly concerned with phase 3, the final stage. The basic argument of the dispossessionist school is that under phase 3 nearly 1.2 million peasant households did not receive any land and were subsequently evicted. Unable to make a living in rural areas, it is argued, a large portion of this population migrated to the cities and played a crucial role in the overthrow of the *ancien régime*. Given the lack of solid empirical evidence to support this view and incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, the persistence of this view would seem to be due to a continued reliance on secondary sources and a disregard of primary sources. Some of the secondary sources, on which much of the analysis by the dispossessionist school is based, were written in the 1960s and early 1970s—before the final results of the reform were published (in the mid-1970s). For some time, however, detailed information on the results of land reform has been readily available.

More by accident than by design, research on the nature and extent of land reform in Iran is greatly aided by the agricultural censuses that preceded the beginning and followed the end of land reform—namely, the 1960 inaugural census of agriculture, the 1974 census of agriculture, and the 1975 rural survey. The strength of the official land reform statistics lies in the fact that such data is consistent with census results, despite often confusing definitions and several misclassifications under the 1960 census, one of the earliest of such undertakings in a developing country. Moreover, by the standards of the Third World, as noted by several writers, Iran's social, economic, and rural statistics are extensive and reliable.<sup>8</sup> Also, as indicated above, detailed results of land reform in several

8. See Wolfgang Lautenschlager, "The Effects of an Overvalued Exchange Rate on the Iranian Economy, 1979–84," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18 (1986), p. 31. Karshenas, *Oil, State, and Industrialization in Iran*, also concluded that the agricultural sector statistics were

provinces have been published by the Islamic government, and these provincial results are fully consistent with the overall results.

The 1960 census of agriculture counted 2.44 million agricultural households, of which 1.8 million were sharecroppers or tenants and were thus potential beneficiaries of the land reform that sought to transfer ownership of land cultivated by tenants to the tenants. The remainder were primarily peasant proprietors and would not be included in such a land reform since they already owned the land they cultivated. The final result of land reform, based on adding the number of beneficiaries reported to have received land under each phase, showed that 2.214 million peasants received land, which exceeded the figure derived from the 1960 census. Adding the number of peasant proprietors who owned land before reform brought the total to 3 million, a number exceeding the 2.48 million agricultural holdings reported in the 1974 census.

The key to these discrepancies was found in a large-scale micro-level study of land reform by Cyrus Salmanzadeh and Gwyn Jones, a contribution of lasting value.<sup>9</sup> The study found that at least 97 percent of the 6,927 eligible peasants residing in the 169 villages studied had received land. The study also reported that one-third of those receiving land under phase 3 had also received land under phase 1. Thus, the number of first-time recipients of land under phase 3 was not 1.2 million, which was the total number of beneficiaries under that phase, but 800,000. When this was added to the recipients of land under phases 1 and 2, the sum of 1.814 million was entirely consistent with the census results and indicated that all eligible peasants received land. It was also estimated that land reform transferred the ownership of at least 60 percent of the agricultural land to peasants.<sup>10</sup> A similar result was obtained by Ahmad Ashraf and Mohammad Javad Amid.<sup>11</sup> When added to landholdings already peasant owned, it follows that at least 85 percent of the agricultural land was in peasant hands by the completion of land reform in 1971.

These estimates are fully supported by the results of land reform in the six provinces to be discussed here—Bakhtaran (formerly Kermanshahan), Fars, Hamedan, Isfahan, Lorestan, and Markazi (Central). The information in these

---

consistent with the other sectoral and overall macroeconomic data. If anything, the agricultural growth statistics were on the conservative side. It is noteworthy that the prerevolutionary statistics on agricultural output have been revised upward by the Islamic government. In addition to the overall consistency of the land reform statistics with the 1960 and 1974 agricultural censuses, a study of the sugar industry found that the microeconomic and regional statistics on the sugar farmers were highly consistent with the findings of the 1975 survey of agriculture. M.G. Majd, "The Oil Boom and Structural Transformation in the Sugar Industry of Iran," *Journal of Rural Studies* 7 (1991).

9. Cyrus Salmanzadeh and Gwyn Jones, "An Approach to the Micro Analysis of the Land Reform Program in Southwestern Iran," *Land Economics* 55 (1979).

10. See Majd, "Land Reform Policies in Iran," p. 845.

11. Ashraf, "State and Agrarian Relations," p. 285, states that between 52 and 62 percent of the agricultural land was transferred to peasants. In a study that was highly critical of land reform, *Agriculture, Poverty, and Reform*, p. 107, Amid readily concedes that the available data show "that by the end of land reform all sharecroppers and fixed-rent tenants must have become peasant proprietors. . . . and that about 60% of all villages were redistributed among peasants."

TABLE 1

*A. Results of Land Reform in Six Provinces of Iran (in Hectares)*

Province	Peasants	Land Received	Average Holding
Central	146,714	985,604	6.7
Isfahan	69,680	176,042	2.5
Fars	141,931	586,765	4.1
Lorestan	62,633	331,330	5.3
Bakhtaran	78,073	629,292	8.1
Hamedan	86,971	773,334	8.9
TOTAL	586,002	3,482,367	5.9

*B. Landowners Able to Maintain Land in Six Provinces (in Hectares)*

Province	Landowners	Land Received	Average Holding
Central	3,451	67,568	19.6
Isfahan	7,741	44,343	5.9
Fars	12,966	162,972	12.6
Lorestan	1,996	21,060	10.6
Bakhtaran	4,023	54,778	13.6
Hamedan	2,068	38,492	18.6
TOTAL	31,975	389,213	12.2

Source: Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Agriculture, "Investigation of the Amount of Land Received by Peasants and Landlords due to the Implementation of Land Reform Laws," cited in K. Khosravi, *A Statistical Investigation of the State of Landownership in Six Provinces of Iran* (Tehran: Center for University Publications, 1367 [1988/89]), in Persian.

reports on the number of peasants and the amount of land received by them, or maintained by landlords, is based on files pertaining to each village. Recognizing the problem of multiple counting because of the inclusion of many peasants in more than one phase of land reform, a special effort was made to avoid it by identifying each recipient as listed in the files. According to the 1966 population census, Iran's 3,068,619 settled rural households resided in 66,438 villages.<sup>12</sup> The 1966 settled rural population of these six provinces consisted of 949,956 households and the number of villages was 21,767. Thus, the population share of the six was 31 percent of the total and the number of rural settlements was 32 percent. The number of peasants who received land under the three phases of land reform was 586,002, which is 32.3 percent of the 1.814 million peasant beneficiaries of land reform. (See table 1.)

12. Iran Statistical Center, *Yearbook of Statistics, 1352* (Tehran, 1353 [1974/75]), pp. 33-5, in Persian.

TABLE 2  
*Scope of Land Reform in Six Provinces of Iran*

	Central	Isfahan	Fars	Lorestan	Bakhtaran	Hamedan	Total
Total Villages	6,588	3,336	5,520	2,309	2,726	1,288	21,767
Reform Implemented	4,226	1,421	3,656	1,607	2,664	1,270	14,844
Percentage	64.1	42.6	66.2	69.6	97.7	98.6	68.2
Not Affected	2,362	1,915	1,864	702	62	18	6,923
<i>Reasons for Exclusion from Land Reform</i>							
Peasant Owned	1,608	1,526	1,287	698	12	16	5,147
Percentage	68.0	79.7	68.5	99.4	19.4	88.9	74.3
No Agriculture	439	322	432	—	—	—	1,193
Percentage	19.0	16.8	23.2	—	—	—	17.2
Orchards, Other	315	67	145	4	50	2	583
Percentage	13.0	3.5	8.3	0.6	80.6	10.1	8.5

Source: Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Agriculture, "Investigation of the Amount of Land Received by Peasants and Landlords due to the Implementation of Land Reform Laws," cited in K. Khosravi, *A Statistical Investigation of the State of Landownership in Six Provinces of Iran* (Tehran: Center for University Publications, 1367 [1988/89]), in Persian.

Of the 3.87 million hectares of land affected by the program, 90 percent was transferred to peasants. The data also shows that land reform was implemented in 68.2 percent of the villages and 72 percent of the agricultural villages. (See table 2.) Of the 6,923 villages where land reform was not implemented, nearly three-fourths (5,147) were already owned by peasants and were thus exempt. A large number (1,193) were without agriculture. Of the remaining 583 villages not subject to land reform, 212 consisted of nationalized pastures or solely of orchards; 210 were declared part of urban areas; 82 villages were declared "mechanized," since the owners used wage labor and machinery to cultivate the land. In only 68 villages—a minute fraction of the 21,767 villages—were landlords able to purchase the cultivation rights of peasants which would result in the "dispossession" of the peasants.

The magnitude of this radical transformation in landownership can be seen by the following statistics. With 25 percent of the 20,574 agricultural villages before land reform owned by peasants, private (excluding peasant proprietors), religious, and public landownership constituted 75 percent of the total. Because 90 percent of this land was distributed to peasants, it follows that land reform transferred some 67.5 percent of total agricultural land to the sharecroppers and tenants. When land previously owned by peasants is added to this, fully 92 percent of the agricultural land consisted of peasant holdings by the completion of land reform in 1971. This result is consistent with the 1974 agricultural census finding that 90.6



percent of agricultural land was owner-occupied. Applying El Ghonemy's criteria that a complete land reform is one in which at least 50 percent of the agricultural land is transferred to peasants,<sup>13</sup> Iran's land reform qualifies as "complete," and appears to be the most radical land reform implemented by a non-Marxist state during the twentieth century.

### *The Landless*

Households that neither rented nor owned land were not included in the provisions of land reform. The size of this group has been variously estimated at 1–1.5 million households, or 30–50 percent of the rural population. These households are said to have been an important source of migration. The origin of this inflated number of landless households can be traced to two misclassifications under the 1960 agricultural census. First, in contrast to the practice under the 1956 population census when settlements under 5,000 were designated as rural, the 1960 agricultural census included all settlements under 10,000. Thus, some 400,000 urban households were misclassified as rural landless. Second, up to 600,000 tenant farmers performing wage labor were also misclassified by being included in the ranks of the landless.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in reality, the size of the landless was much smaller than cited in the literature.

As noted, the number of settled rural households in 1966 was 3.068 million. The number of households with land rights—cultivators and fruit growers—was 2.464 million. The difference of 604,000 households constituted the landless population. This was 19.7 percent of the rural population. In terms of the overall average of 46 households per village, 9 households were landless. Not all of these, however, were employed in agriculture; many were rural traders, professionals, or craftsmen. The actual size of the agricultural *khoshneshin* can be estimated using the 1966 census. That census enumerated 368,000 seasonal rural workers of which 86 percent were classified as agricultural wage earners. (See table 3.) Thus, some 320,000 rural landless households, 10.3 percent or 5 households per village, relied on agricultural wage employment. The remaining 287,000 (an average of 4 households per village) were rural traders or craftsmen who did not rely on agriculture. A more egalitarian land reform could have given land to some additional 320,000 households by expropriating much of the 1 million hectares that remained in the possession of 69,800 landlords. Aside from issues of equity—landlords had already lost heavily—this amounted to 2.5 hectares per household. Given the scarcity of water and arable land, a meaningful solution was to find alternative productive employment for this population.

13. M. Riad El Ghonemy, *The Political Economy of Rural Poverty: The Case for Land Reform* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 255.

14. Majd, "Land Reform Policies in Iran," p. 844.



TABLE 3  
*Indicators of Rural Employment, 1956, 1966, 1976 (millions)*

	1956	1966	1976
Rural Labor Force	4.173	5.073	5.460
Regularly Employed	4.100	4.505	4.687
Seasonally Employed	N.A.	0.368	0.596
Unemployed	0.073	0.200	0.177
Unemployment Rate (%)	1.7	3.9	3.2
Agricultural Employment	3.108	3.550	3.357
Nonfarm Employment	0.992	1.323	1.926
Rural Agricultural Employment (%)	75.6	72.9	63.5

Source: Rural and Agricultural Statistics of Iran, *Agah Book on Land and Rural Issues* (Tehran: Agah, 1361 [1982/83]), pp. 176-7, in Persian.

### POST-REFORM AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND POLICY

The performance of the agricultural sector is a crucial determinant of rural welfare because agriculture is the major source of employment and income in rural areas. Its neglect in the current debate on the causes of rural-urban migration is, therefore surprising. The rapid increase in agricultural output and productivity during 1966-1976 was probably unprecedented in Iran's recorded economic history. According to the data published by the Islamic republic,<sup>15</sup> the agricultural growth rate during 1966-1976 was 5.6 percent, a very high rate by international standards, according to the World Bank,<sup>16</sup> and contrasted with a weak growth rate of 2.2 percent during 1959-1966. Particularly strong growth was recorded in the production of cash crops such as sugarbeets, cotton, oilseeds, fruits, and vegetables, products whose production was dominated by small farmers who grew the crops on small plots.<sup>17</sup> With declining agricultural employment, productivity rose by nearly 7 percent per year. While the pre-1966 decade was one of declining per capita food production, the trend during 1966-1976 was completely reversed, and per capita food production rose by 2.9 percent per year, justifying the argument that land reform removed one of the main obstacles to industrial growth, namely the slow growth of agricultural output reported for the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>18</sup>

15. Bank Markazi, *National Accounts of Iran 1338-1356* (Tehran, 1360 [1981/82]), pp. 112-113, in Persian.

16. See Amuzegar, *Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution*, p. 61.

17. M.G. Majd, "The Oil Boom and Agricultural Development: A Reconsideration of Agricultural Policy in Iran," *Journal of Energy and Development* 15 (1989).

18. Karshenas, *Oil, State, and Industrialization in Iran*, p. 162.

Iran's agriculture also benefited from substantial protection and government investment. Reportedly, the improvement in the terms of trade for farm products during the 1950s, which resulted from the slow growth of agriculture and strict import controls, continued during the 1960s and 1970s because of import controls and tariffs on industrial crops, price supports for grains, and the near 10 percent increase in demand for food.<sup>19</sup> Indirect protection consisted of providing a wide array of producers with subsidized chemical inputs and credit. Such programs were effective in helping small farmers cultivate resource-intensive cash crops, such as sugarbeets and cotton, and resulted in a large increase in the use of fertilizers by peasants.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to improvements in the terms of trade, government development expenditure and subsidized long-term loans resulted in a substantial transfer of resources into the agricultural sector. Total government capital expenditure during 1963–1977 (354.2 billion rials) and credit provided by specialized state banks (357.5 billion rials) amounted to 711.7 billion rials, or \$10 billion, excluding interest rate and input subsidies. This exceeded the corresponding sum of 663.1 billion rials provided to manufacturing.<sup>21</sup> Thus, unlike the experience of most developing countries, and contrary to a widely held view, agriculture was a beneficiary of substantial protection. When loans from commercial banks and other private sources of finance are added to state funds allocated to agriculture during the 1970s, the resulting yearly sum of \$2.6 billion amounted to 5 percent of the GDP, a formidable sum given that the contribution of agriculture to the GDP had fallen to 8.7 percent by 1977. This expenditure was also well in excess of corresponding figures in such oil-producing countries as Mexico and Nigeria.<sup>22</sup>

### *RURAL AND AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYMENT, 1956–1976*

Iran's population census is conducted during the month of November when agricultural activity is at its lowest, and the level of unemployment among seasonal agricultural and construction workers is at its peak. Consequently, the population census figures have tended to overstate the true level of unemployment. In recognition of this factor, the census definition of the seasonally unemployed as "all persons who were unemployed due to the effects of the seasonal nature of their work. . . . (and who) had neither received wages or salaries in cash or in kind nor had been seeking work," makes it clear that the seasonally unemployed are not to be counted as unemployed when computing the

19. Ibid.

20. "Rural and Agricultural Statistics of Iran," *Agah Book on Land and Rural Issues* (Tehran: Agah, 1360 [1981/82]), p. 185, in Persian; Majd, "The Oil Boom and Structural Transformation in the Sugar Industry of Iran."

21. Karshenas, *Oil, State, and Industrialization*, p. 107.

22. Majd, "The Oil Boom and Agricultural Development," p. 135.

rural unemployment rate.<sup>23</sup> To treat seasonal workers—of which 86 percent in 1966 and 96 percent in 1976 consisted of agricultural workers—as “unemployed,” as has been done in the literature,<sup>24</sup> is an inappropriate use of the rural employment statistics. In the 1956 population census, those classified as “seasonally unemployed” were specifically treated as employed. In order to maintain consistency between the three census results, the seasonally unemployed have been treated as employed when computing the unemployment rate.<sup>25</sup> The unemployment rate reported in table 3 is based on the census definition of unemployed as “all persons who have never been employed or have been previously employed but were not employed and were seeking work during the seven days preceding the census enumeration.” An alternative measure of the unemployment rate can be derived by including the nonagricultural seasonal workers in the ranks of the unemployed. This alternative measure of the unemployment rate was 4.9 percent and 3.7 percent for 1966 and 1976, respectively.

Several other features are of interest. First, while seasonal agricultural employment rose sharply by 256,000 (81 percent), full-time agricultural employment fell by 421,000 (13.2 percent), resulting in a net decline of 193,000 (5.4 percent). Second, there was a sizable expansion in nonagricultural employment during 1966–1976, which grew by 603,000—655,000 when non-farm seasonal workers in 1966 are excluded. Third, the rural construction industry accounted for 62.7 percent of the increase in nonagricultural employment. Employment in that industry rose from 248,000 in 1966 to 626,000 in 1976, an indication that rural Iran experienced a construction boom in this period.<sup>26</sup>

#### *THE MAGNITUDE AND ORIGIN OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION, 1956–1976*

Although data on population and migration prior to 1956 is sketchy, the evidence indicates that rural-urban migration had been underway at least since the early 1900s, at the onset of an increasing rate of population growth, and that the urban population growth had exceeded the overall population growth at least since 1935. The population of Tehran, grew from 0.5 million in 1940 to 1.5 million in 1956, an annual growth rate of 7 percent.<sup>27</sup> During the 1956–1976 period, population and labor force grew by 78 percent and 62 percent, respectively. Agricultural employment and the rural labor force grew by 8 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Despite the slower growth of the rural labor force, due to migration and stagnant employment in agriculture, and the substantial increases in

23. Iran Statistical Center, *National Census of Population and Housing, November 1976: Total Country* (Tehran: Plan and Budget Organization), b-c.

24. Mohtadi, “Rural Inequality.”

25. Rural and Agricultural Statistics of Iran, pp. 157–59.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

27. Ashraf, *State and Agrarian Relations*, p. 289; Nattagh, *Agriculture and Regional Development*, p. 61.

TABLE 4  
*Rural and Urban Population, 1956, 1966, 1976 (millions)*

Year	Rural	Urban	Total
1956	13.001	5.954	18.955
1966	15.994	9.795	25.789
1976	17.854	15.855	33.709

Source: Rural and Agricultural Statistics of Iran, *Agah Book on Land and Rural Issues* (Tehran: Agah Publishers, 1361 [1982/83]), p. 175, in Persian.

productivity during the 1960s and 1970s, there remained a large gap between the rural-urban per capita income and productivity.<sup>28</sup> This gap was indicative of a large reserve of surplus labor in the rural sector. Given the limited scope of agriculture as a source of additional employment and income, the real solution to the problems of rural poverty and underemployment consisted of creating nonfarm employment in rural areas or of migration. Describing conditions in some of the remote highland villages, one observer painted a bleak picture of overpopulation and Malthusian pressures that could only be alleviated by migration.<sup>29</sup>

Reliable data on Iran's population in this period is provided by the population censuses of 1956, 1966, and 1976. (See table 4.) The compound annual population growth rate during 1956–66 was 3.1 percent; during 1966–1976, it declined to 2.71 percent; during 1956–1976 span the rate was 2.92 percent. Urban population growth was a steady 5 percent per year during this 20-year period and does not indicate a sudden upsurge in rural-urban migration. In the absence of data covering the entire period, migration has to be estimated. The estimates, however, differ considerably.

Using the demographic survival ratio method, which measures the difference between the actual population in the "end year" and the population that would have survived based on the natural growth rate and the population in the base year, Mohtadi arrived at 3.5 million rural-urban migrants during 1966–1976.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, using the vital statistics on births and deaths, Karshenas arrived at an

28. Karshenas, *Oil, State, and Industrialization in Iran*, p. 275.

29. See Bowen-Jones's observation in V.F. Costello, *Urbanization in the Middle East* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 46.

30. As pointed out by Mohtadi (p. 841), the census years (1956, 1966, 1976) do not correspond with the land reform period (1962–1971). The practice of using the pre-1966 and the post-1966 years as pre- and post-land reform years can be justified on at least three grounds. First, the censuses provide the only source of reliable and extensive data on population. Second, although land reform was launched in 1962, because of a shortage of trained personnel it did not proceed simultaneously in all provinces, and, especially during the initial phase, it took place in one province at a time. Third, in 1966 the second phase was far from completion, and phase 3 (1969–71), the most important stage in terms of peasants and landlords affected, was some years away. The 1966–1976 period accurately reflects the period of land reform and beyond.



estimate of 2.34 million. Similarly, a study by the Iran Statistical Center (ISC) estimated that migration was 2.26 million during 1966–1976.<sup>31</sup>

The figure of 3.5 million noted by Mohtadi substantially overestimates the actual level of migration, but the other estimates, are relatively accurate. The first problem with Mohtadi's estimate is that it is based on an assumed natural rural population growth rate of 3.5 percent and an urban population growth rate of 2.4 percent. Given the rural-urban population share, this amounts to an overall growth rate of 3.1 percent during 1966–1976. The population census, however, indicated that the growth rate was 2.71 percent. The second problem concerns the definition of urban and rural settlements. In accordance with the United Nations definition, in the three prerevolution population censuses, an urban settlement (*abadi-e shahri*) consists of a population site of 5,000 and above. Exceptions are few and insignificant.<sup>32</sup> A rural settlement (*abadi-e roostai*) is one with less than 5,000. When the population of a rural settlement surpassed 5,000, it would be reclassified as "urban" in the next census. This resulted in an exaggerated growth of the urban population and an underestimation of the growth of rural population. Census data show that the number of towns with populations of 5,000 and above was 186 in 1956, 263 in 1966, and 373 in 1976. Since the doubling in the number of towns during 1956–1976 was due to reclassification of those rural settlements whose population reached 5,000, the reclassification was considerable. Specifically, the 1976 population of the 110 "new" towns was 666,083. The corresponding figure for the 77 new towns in 1966 was at least 385,000 and more probably 462,000.

The third problem concerns the inclusion of nonsedentary groups consisting of tribal (*ashayer*) and nomadic (*moteharek*) populations in the rural population figures reported in table 4. The nonsettled population in the 1966 census was reported to be 709,799. (The tribal component was 462,146, and the nomadic component was 247,653.) The figure for the 1976 nonsettled population shows an astonishing drop to 347,812 (337,176 for tribal and only 10,636 for nomadic). Thus, the nomadic all but disappeared. Assuming a normal population growth for these groups, it appears that 313,000 nomadic and 267,000 tribal members (580,000 total) had left the ranks of the nonsedentary population by joining the settled rural population, or more likely, by migration to urban areas, or by emigration.<sup>33</sup> While

31. Iran Statistical Center, "An Investigation on the Extent of Overall Rural-Urban Migration," n.d., in Persian, cited in Nattagh, *Agriculture and Regional Development*, p. 86.

32. The number of towns with less than 5,000 was 22 under the 1966 census, little changed from that of 1956. The number had seemingly declined to 6 by 1976. Iran Statistical Center, *National Census of Population and Housing, 1966: Total Country Settled Population*, vol. 168 (Tehran: Plan and Budget Organization, August 1969); Iran Statistical Center, *Yearbook of Statistics, 1360* (Tehran, 1361 [1982/83]), p. 68, in Persian.

33. Iran Statistical Center, *Yearbook of Statistics, 1360*, p. 58. Examples are provided by the Bakhtiari and the Baluchi tribes. The trend for the Bakhtiaris was to become wage laborers in the oil industry in Khuzestan. The Baluchis, in contrast, emigrated to the Arab side of the Persian Gulf. (The author is grateful to Brian Spooner for these examples.) The exodus of the nonsettled population from the rural areas during 1966–1976 is indicated by the jump in the number of empty or abandoned *abadis*,



TABLE 5  
*Structure of Rural Settlements by Population Size, 1956, 1966, 1976*

Size	1956		1966		1976	
	Settlements	Population	Settlements	Population	Settlements	Population
4,999-2,500	256	868,739	308	1,024,855	484	1,612,000
2,499-1,000	1,682	2,414,516	2,087	3,011,208	2,735	3,990,000
999-500	4,314	2,937,366	5,314	3,635,593	6,442	4,306,000
499-100	24,427	5,637,654	27,351	6,441,030	26,680	6,428,000
99-50	8,420	622,511	10,528	766,266	9,758	706,000
49-25	4,688	173,801	7,884	286,051	7,500	272,000
24-1	5,267	66,757	12,966	148,735	11,654	135,000
TOTAL	49,054	12,757,344	66,438	15,313,738	65,253	17,449,000

Source: Iran Statistical Center, *Yearbook of Statistics, 1349* (Tehran, 1350 [1971/72]), p. 38, in Persian. Iran Statistical Center, *Yearbook of Statistics, 1362* (Tehran, 1363 [1984/85]), p. 41, in Persian.

this remarkable decline in the nonsettled population during 1966-1976 merits investigation, the change in the status of the nonsedentary population cannot be treated as regular rural-urban migration. Moreover, since the debate concerns the magnitude of the rural-urban migration that is said to have resulted from land reform and agricultural policy, the population of interest is the settled one, the size of which is given in table 5.

Subtracting the reclassified, nomadic, and tribal components from 3.5 million, the resulting 2.2 million is very close to the estimates provided by Karshenas and the ISC. Thus, on average, rural-urban migration during 1966-1976 amounted to 220,000 to 230,000 per year compared to 152,000 during the previous decade. Annual rural-urban migration during 1956-1966 amounted to some 1.2 percent of the rural population, and the corresponding figure for 1966-1976 was 1.5 percent. This hardly qualifies for the description of a "massive migratory exodus." Migration accounted for at most 35-40 percent of the increase in the urban population. Moreover, the growth of the urban population that resulted from migration in Iran was lower than that of many other countries of the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>34</sup> In addition to employment considerations, a principal reason for rural-urban migration appears to have included educational opportunities for young males and marriage by young females.

which rose from 15,929 in 1966 to 26,952. These abadis frequently served as seasonal residences for the migrating tribes. This contrasted with a decline of 1,185 in the number of settled villages. (See table 5.) Iran Statistical Center, *Yearbook of Statistics, 1362* (Tehran, 1363 [1984/85]), p. 41, in Persian.

34. Of the 17 other countries in the region, rural-urban migration during 1965-1980 accounted for more than 40 percent of the increase in the urban population in 8 countries; it was 36-40 percent in 3 countries; it was under 35 percent in the remaining 6 countries, which included Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. See Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p. 266.

A demographic study by the ISC during 1973–76 documented the importance of educational needs and noneconomic factors in rural-urban migration. In particular, the study found that the highest migration rates for any age category were for boys 15–19 years of age. This prompted the study to conclude that “heavy migration, undoubtedly because of school, begins in rural areas around age 10 but in the cities only by age 15, boys moving in much larger numbers than girls. . . . The migration of women of 15–24 years is to a large extent caused by marriage.”<sup>35</sup> Economic migrants were mostly men 20–24 years of age. After 25, migration fell steeply and the population 35 and over was almost sedentary. These results are also contrary to the statement that the Iranian “land reform appears to have played a crucial role in the subsequent migratory process.”<sup>36</sup> The tendency for the offspring of farmers to leave their rural homes for the cities is a worldwide phenomena. It cannot be blamed on land reform. Moreover, the young age structure of the migrants indicates that migration consisted of some of the natural population growth of rural areas. This clearly points to Malthusian pressures noted above: young men left to seek an education and a better livelihood than the one available in rural areas. Data in table 5 on the changing structure of rural settlements derived from the three censuses highlights this point.

During the period 1956–1966, the population of the larger villages (500 inhabitants and above) grew an average of 2.1 percent per year, and that of medium settlements (100–499 inhabitants) increased by 1.3 percent per year. Considering that the overall population growth in this period was 3.1 percent (natural rural population growth was likely 3.5 percent), and that more than 90 percent of the rural population resided in villages of 100 or more inhabitants, the slow growth of these settlements is indicative of substantial migration from medium and, to a lesser extent, from larger villages. The population of small villages (under 100 inhabitants) increased by 2.9 percent per year. This increase, however, appears in part to be the result of undercounting in the 1956 census of villages with less than 50 inhabitants. The sharp rise in the number of these villages from 9,955 to 20,850 in the 1966 census is not plausible and points to an undercount in the 1956 census.

There were some interesting changes in the structure of rural settlements and in the migration pattern during 1966–1976. First, the population of small villages (under 100 inhabitants) fell by 7.3 percent and some 1,000 were abandoned. Next, the population of settlements with 100–499 inhabitants, by far the largest category in terms of population and settlements, was unchanged, an indication that the bulk of the natural increase had migrated. In contrast to the 1956–1966 period, the population of villages with 500 and above grew by 2.6 percent per year, only slightly less than the overall 2.7 percent growth during 1966–1976, an indication of

35. Iran Statistical Center, “Population Survey of Iran, Final Report, 1973–1976” (Tehran), June 1978, pp. 106–8.

36. Mohtadi, “Rural Inequality,” p. 842

a much lower migration rate than in the earlier decade. Moreover, the population of settlements in the 1,000–4,999 range increased by 3.1 percent, well above the 2.7 percent overall population increase. Thus, by giving the ownership of land cultivated by peasants to the peasants, land reform appears to have reduced migration. By 1976, 58 percent of the rural population resided in settlements in excess of 500 inhabitants, up from 48 percent in the previous decade.

To sum up, in contrast to 1956–1966, when rural migration originated primarily from large and medium settlements (100 inhabitants and above), rural migration during 1966–1976 originated mostly from medium and small settlements (under 500 inhabitants). In particular, much of the migration came from villages of 100 to 499 inhabitants, with an average of 235 (or 47 households), and from villages with under 100 people (average of 39 persons or 8 households). Often located in mountainous or semi-arid regions, these villages could neither provide an adequate standard of living for the rising population nor meet the educational needs of the young, thus leaving migration as a way out. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of villages in the 100–499 person group. In contrast, there was little pressure to leave the larger villages. In addition to greater educational and social amenities, a rapidly rising agricultural productivity benefited most the areas where enhanced production took place, namely, larger villages located in well-watered fertile regions and not the marginal villages found in mountainous and semi-arid parts. Moreover, the expanding nonagricultural employment (in particular the rural construction boom) occurred mostly in these larger rural population centers.

### *CONCLUSION*

As already stated, land reform in Iran has been possibly the most radical non-Marxist land reform of the twentieth century. It gave land to all of Iran's tenant cultivators and did not result in peasant dispossession and destitution. Nor did it result in a "massive migratory exodus." The analogy with the English enclosures is, thus, entirely inappropriate. In terms of agricultural growth and productivity, land reform was a huge success. Thirty years later, and with much research in between, the persistence of so much myth and misinformation on the subject is remarkable. Much of the problem can be attributed to a continued attempt to analyze Iran's land reform within a neo-Marxist paradigm with its emphasis on class struggle, the predicted proletarianization, and the eventual disappearance of the peasantry. The salient features of Iran's land reform, however, do not fit this theory. The continued use of early secondary sources, written years before the final results of land reform were known, and the disregard of the primary sources, have also contributed to the confusion and misinformation.

