



MONITORING THE MEDITERRANEAN STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT(MSSD)

AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT National Study Egypt, Summary

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Despite a relative downturn, Egyptian agriculture remains an important sector which provides employment to 28% of the working population, mostly women, and contributes some 47 % to the exports of raw materials. With a rural population that is not only dominant (57.8% of the total population in 2004) but also very young (40.8% aged less than 15 years), the rural environment represents a major stake in the country's development. However, the land and water resources, limited in the Nile Valley and Delta, are hardly commensurate with demographic growth.

Agricultural development policies had been geared, initially, towards intensification of agricultural production based on a massive use of inputs and, above all, on a perennial irrigation which helped double up the harvested area (6 million 100 000 ha) with respect to a farmland area of 3 million 550 000 ha and reach an intensification rate ranging between 1.7 and 2.

Since the 1980s, the top priority of the public policies has been the extension of crop land via land reclamation. Private sector investments held a key position in this strategy, which gave rise to large and very large-scale farms. On the whole, the farms of the new lands are more modern, less focused on traditional crops (such as cotton, corn or wheat) and more dedicated to such crops as fruits and vegetables.

In the old lands, agriculture is hampered by great fragmentation and prevalence of micro-farms (81% of less than one hectare). Farm work employs a large majority of rural women, often unremunerated, as well as a high percentage of illiterate and informal labour.

The poverty rate stands at 20%, with a significant disparity between urban population (10.7% poverty rate) and rural population (27.4% poverty rate).

Being much less provided with infrastructures and services, rural areas have to contend with several environmental problems directly affecting public health:

- Water pollution and poor quality (chemical and organic pollution) caused mainly by disposal of wastes, absence of wastewater collection and of sanitation;
- Pollution and unwholesomeness caused by lack of collection and treatment of solid wastes (domestic and production wastes).

Further exacerbating these problems are a deficient drinking water supply (deteriorated supply network), the recurrent issue of soil salinity (due to drainage), loss of farmland due to urban sprawl, the risks arising from global warming—namely the flooding of part of the Nile Delta—, and the combine effects of a twofold increase in water loss via evaporation and crop needs.

Organic farming is marginal as yet. The aspect related to the quality of agricultural products is nascent in the public policies, with the establishment of a national entity entrusted with setting quality control standards and procedures.

Public policies are fairly active in the field of protection of natural areas (often uninhabited areas). Egypt has instated a Ministry for the Environment and an executing agency, set up a project for the inventory and protection of medicinal plants, as well as a gene bank project dedicated to conservation of the genetic heritage of native plants, and signed the relevant international conventions (UNFCCC, UNFICBD, etc.).

In the field of rural development, one notices that a considerable part of the human and financial means is concentrated in major hydro-agricultural development projects, and that rural

development is still closely related to agricultural development. On the institutional level, it is worth pointing out the complexity and multiplication of the relevant bodies, as well as the low extent of decentralisation and of institutionalisation of the action of the stakeholders, which exacerbates red tape (administrative cumbersomeness) and strongly hampers field action.

Environmental sustainability and socio-economic sustainability are particularly intertwined in the case of Egypt. The demographic weight of the rural population, the high population density, the limited resources concentrated within 4% of the country's total area, and the need to increase agricultural production constitute a context of strong tension over resources, which requires resource utilisation policies and methods seeking to meet at once the requirement of development and that of environment protection. Yet, poverty, poor living conditions and the inequalities affecting the rural environment represent factors that are not conducive to the implementation of such policies, hence the need for a rural development strategy which provides the social and economic conditions necessary for a sustainability dynamics.