



Deutscher Tropentag - Bonn, 9-11 October 2001
Conference on International Agricultural Research for
Development

Sustainable Livelihoods and Farmers' Decision Making Behaviour in the West Bank, Palestine

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Abstract

The actual situation in Palestine shows the importance of questions of power and control over natural resources and institutional processes, to the performance and vulnerability of the agricultural sector. With Bourdieu's understanding of 'social structure', (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) 'capital', 'habitus', and 'position', the rural Palestinian society is approached in order to depict groups of actors, their priorities and perceived options and to conclude on the relation between distribution of resources, power and potential range of action. The 'sustainable livelihood approach' further operationalises the forms of 'capital' by attributing the meaning of assets. The practical use rural families make of these assets to satisfy farm or household needs is analysed in relation to the context of vulnerability and farmers' considerations of economic, social and ecological sustainability. The study shows that the high level of social, political and economic insecurity favours flexible and reactive decision making and short term planning. Households follow a strategy of income and resource diversification. The lack of reliable institutions leads to an increased importance of informal networks, based on personal relations. These networks tend, by way of the interests involved, to be exclusive to the benefit of only few people and further expand existing social disparities. Palestinian farmers place high value on the accumulation of social capital in order to gain power and social security. The younger generation however, tends to seek economic independence, which is based on outside agricultural employment and /or the accumulation of cultural capital.

Introduction

In Palestine the agricultural sector had been subject to deep structural changes during the last decades. The dimension of the agricultural development in Palestine had been masked so far, due to the unavailability of reliable data material. Until 1998 the statistical information concerning the agricultural sector were estimated and perpetuated on the basis of data collected in the early 80ies by the Israeli administration. According to these estimations agriculture contributed 22-40% to the GNP of the Palestinian territories and employed up to 50% of the population. Under this assumption, agriculture was rightly called 'the backbone of the Palestinian society' (ARIJ, 1998). Only the 1999 agricultural report of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 1999) revealed that these figures had been far too high and that the agricultural share of the GNP would not exceed 6%. Lacking a definition of agricultural labour and due to the fact, that most

of the Palestinian families are still seasonally involved in at least some minor agricultural activities suggest that the new figure, indicating 15% of the labour force working in agriculture, is still overvalued.

Various factors contributed to the relative decline of the agricultural sector's performance. Most of the factors however are not to be sought within the agricultural production process, but in social practices or in the political conditions. In the same time, social structures and processes, play a major role in the organisation of agriculture. Since small-scale agriculture is prevailing in Palestine, the family-household constitutes the unit of production and consumption. Decisions about the allocation of resources are thus always integrated into a system of priorities, with the aim to pursue farm and family interests respectively. Last but not least, the neo-patrimonial organisation and the 'rentier' orientation are effective dimensions in the Palestinian society (BECK 1997, 641ff) and therefore have a considerable impact on the availability and distribution of resources and power on the level of the rural community.

The study, on which this article is based, proposes an actor oriented approach to the identification of priorities, resources, decision making principles and livelihood strategies of farm households. The analysis focuses on the farm household's economical, social and political objectives and perceived options to achieve the objectives within the frame of agriculture, the rural community and the Palestinian context. The final goal is to provide decision-makers with an in-depth view of the rationales of the Palestinian farm households' priorities and strategies, in order to address agricultural stakeholders out of their own framework of relevance.

Analytical frame and methodological instruments

The analytical frame is informed by the theoretical concepts of BOURDIEU and the 'Sustainable livelihood approach' (ODI). According to BOURDIEU (1992, 1998), social structures are constituted through positions of actors, endowed with a mix of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. The notion of capital thus implies all forms of tangible and intangible resources. The value of the different kinds of capital as well as the distribution of capital vary according to the social formation and so do the social positions. The 'sustainable livelihood approach' emphasises on the relation between the forms of capital (assets), farm household strategies and outcomes, further highlighting the embeddedness of the household into a vulnerability context, processes and structures (FORSYTH, SCOONES, LEACH 1998; CARNEY, ASHLEY 1999).

With the combination of the two concepts, the 'national' context, the communities and farm households were approached in order to reach conclusions on the following research areas:

- On the 'national' level: 1. The vulnerability context 2. Structures and processes
- On the community level: 1. The availability of capital/resources in the community 2. The distribution of forms of capital in the village; 3. The value of the capital mix; 4. Social positions in the village and thereby concluding on categories of households.
- On household level: 1. The household's priorities, long and short term perspectives, perceived vulnerabilities; 2. Options, strategies, resource allocation, capital exchange practices; 3. Outcomes; 4. Priorities and strategies of different household members.

The empirical part of the research was carried out in five villages in the West Bank, which were selected according to the main agro-climatical zones, with the aim to cover the different prevailing agricultural production systems. During a two and a half year period, the villages were regularly visited to gather information. The process of data collection was organised in a flexible way in order to integrate new upcoming questions and not to miss correlations and interdependencies relevant to the researched, which are not pre-existing in the researchers mindset. Participatory appraisal tools (mapping, transect, ranking etc.) proved to be most suitable, since they allow the actors to fully express themselves, and further facilitate discussions in various groups (defined through gender, age, function etc.), the households and with individuals in the villages. The background to the research was set by an extensive literature review, focusing on the macro-economic aspects of agriculture in Palestine as well as the impact of the political situation on the agricultural sector.

Findings

The 'national' context

The 'sustainable livelihoods approach' suggests a view on rural households livelihood strategies with an emphasis on the social and political context in which household decisions take place. The household is understood as pursuing a set of economic, social and political goals, based on the availability of resources and the perceived potential options of use. The 'sustainable livelihoods approach' further focuses on 'poverty', understood in terms of deprivation which goes beyond the mere economic perspective, and comprises social and political exclusion, lack of access to resources, options and power, lack of entitlements and high vulnerability (CHRISTOPLOS et al. 2001).

With regard to Palestine, the assessment of the vulnerability context is imperative due to the complex economic and political situation in which household decisions take place. According to WORLD BANK (2001, 74) estimates, poverty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has risen sharply in the first three month of the current crisis, effecting 30% of the Palestinian population by the end of 2000. This clearly indicates a high level of vulnerability, to which a broad part of the society is prone to. The main causes and roots of vulnerability in the Palestinian society can be explained by the military occupation, the neo-patrimonial structures and the 'rentier' system, which will be shortly outlined for the West Bank in the following.

Since 1967 the West Bank is under Israeli military occupation. Right from the start, all legislative, executive and judicial powers in the West Bank were assumed by the military area commander. By way of Military Orders issued by the military commander, the previously existing legal system was by-passed and almost every step of civil live in the West Bank was regulated through a system of permissions and restrictions based on Military Orders (SHEHADEH 1992, 252ff). In the first years of the occupation, an integration of the West Bank economy into the Israeli economy took place, which consisted on the one hand of permitting Palestinians to work in Israel and on the other hand to create a captive market for Israeli products in the West Bank. The flow of goods remained one sided, with the Palestinians having no means to protect the local markets, nor to export without Israeli permission (SHADID 1988, 124). Economic activities in the West Bank were further prone to licences which were largely impossible to obtain in sectors competitive to the Israeli economy (ABU KISHK 1988, 178). Although the economic situation on household level improved due to the work opportunities in Israel, no

indigenous economic development took place in the West Bank and after only few years, the West Bank was economically completely depending on Israel (ROBERTS 1992, 68; BENVENISTI 1986, 67). A major source of insecurity for the rural population and the agricultural sector resulted from the Israeli assumption of control over natural resources. Already in 1985 52% of West Bank land had been confiscated, with the process of expropriation continuing until the present day (BENVENISTI 1986, 120; ARIJ 1997). The water resources available to Palestinians have been restricted since 1967. While the access to part of the surface water was closed by the declaration of military area or natural reserve, the drilling of new wells was generally not permitted to Palestinians by the Israeli authorities (LEIN 1998, 4; ROUYER 2000, 48).

The peace process which started in 1993 did not fulfil the expectations concerning Palestinian independence, economic development and increased stability, nor did it de facto challenge the nature of the military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The imposition of a total closure on the occupied territories from 1993 on prevented the movement of Palestinian persons and goods to and through Israel, and separated the West Bank from Gaza and Jerusalem. The newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) exercised its self-rule only over a limited territorial area, endowed with no real executive powers, while the control over natural resources, roads and Israeli settlements, borders and trade remained in the hand of Israel and the military administration. The lack of control over resources, restricted access to export markets, the competition of Palestinian farm products with highly subsidised Israeli products on the local market and the until now missing institutionalised policy and supportive services for the sector continue to curtail the competitive advantages of Palestinian agriculture. (ARIJ 1994,17; EU 1998; ROBLET 1999,13; ABURAJAB-TAMIMI 1999, 30

The de-structuring of indigenous organisations and institutions together with a policy of granting and withdrawing permissions and licenses at will, created a climate of economic paralysis, institutional vacuum and social particularism. This means, that short term planning is prevailing and remains highly flexible and reactive, thus investments are usually diversified into several small 'projects', as are household resources in general. The lack of reliable institutions leads to an increasing importance of informal networks, based on personal relations. These networks by way of the interests involved, tend to be exclusive to the benefit of few people and further expand existing social disparities. In this, also the 'rentier system' and the neo-patrimonial structure of the society play a role. The financial contributions from the outside (through donors and migrants) in their sum exceed the internally produced value and thus, the attraction, appropriation and distribution of foreign funds became a major tool to establish a power base. For those involved in the competition for foreign support, the development aspect is more often a by product, while the direct and aspired benefit results from the redistribution of 'co-operation dividends' in form of projects, jobs and money and the thereby creation of obligations and loyalties. The connection between donor funded aid, redistribution mechanisms on the basis of personal relations and the accumulation of individual power can be witnessed in Palestine on different levels of aggregation, such as the Palestinian Authority, NGOs and local communities.

A constraint to agriculture on the basis of social practices has to be seen in the land fragmentation. The inheritance practices foresee the division of the property among all male offspring in equal shares. In consequence, the land available to the nuclear family is decreasing in every generation. This means, that the majority of land owners do not

own enough land, to be able to make a living from agriculture. The often scattered and small plots of land further hamper mechanisation, and make renting inconvenient for potential tenants. The problem of land fragmentation is less pressing in irrigated agriculture, since land scarcity can be balanced with intensification through financial investments and technological innovation. Irrigated agriculture is taking place on only 5% of the cultivated land in the West Bank, although producing 25% of crops. Thus, intensification of production remains an option for the minority, as long as no further water resources are made available, which can be concluded only through political negotiations.

The Community

Until today the most relevant forms of capital – contributing to social positions of power and prestige - in Palestinian rural communities are the social and the economic capital. But the composition of the capital has considerably changed over the time. While in the past, the economic capital was determined by the ownership and control of land and (in irrigated areas) water, today, the value of a stable income from outside agricultural employment is increasing. Even though the prices for land and water remained the same or increased, a persons' wealth and influence is no longer estimated according to his possession of agricultural resources. This is intrinsically linked to the notion of social capital, describing the effective social network of relations a person has, which can be used to facilitate processes, accumulate resources and gain power. The former rural elite, the big land owners, accumulated social capital and legitimised power, through patron-client relations with their tenants. With the clients option to work outside agriculture, the relations became less effective and thereby the symbolic value of the land decreased. Some of the notables succeeded however to establish 'good' relations to members in the Palestinian Authority (PA) or NGOs, which allow them to perform as 'brokers' for development projects and services in the village. Besides the enormous personal benefits the 'brokers' draw from the attraction of external support, a renewed system of patron-client relations and dependencies emerges within the village.

The role of agriculture is varying considerably in the researched villages. Where water for irrigation is available, agricultural production continues to be a major source of income in the village. This goes generally along with stronger family and household cohesion, dictated by the availability and allocation of resources. While a stable income from outside agricultural employment is highly valued and allows the accumulation of economic capital or a rise in symbolic consumption, it is also – especially in the case of work in Israel – a source of insecurity. Thus, in times of political crisis and closures, when work and travel permits are withdrawn, the 'stable' income suddenly is suspended for unpredictable periods of time. This is probably one of the reasons, why farmers and landowners, although recognising the economic advantage of a salary, continue to stress the status of land, agricultural production and hard and honest work.

The accumulation of cultural capital in form of higher education is increasingly perceived as an option to augment the personal status. For the cultural capital to be effectively valuable on community level, thus to enhance ones, or the households 'position', it has to be linked to employment opportunities and economic advantages. At least in the rural communities, being educated does not imply a value in itself. Since education is time consuming and costly and has no measurably rate of return, only the more wealthy households are able to divert resources to education. This further suggests, that the social structure and positions in the village are not challenged by way of the accumulation of cultural capital. The consequence is the reproduction of the social structure,

with the different families and households remaining in their positions, on the basis of slightly changed values of the capital mix. Cultural capital is seen as the only form of capital, which can not be confiscated nor destroyed, therefore its popularity as a form of investment increased all over the Palestinian society.

The household

The main criteria to distinguish categories of households is the amount of land and water owned and the intensity level of production, which is correlated to capital investment. Another factor is the household's composition in age, and number of the members. A general trend of the household to secure livelihoods consists of the diversification of income. This may imply the decision to conduct agriculture as a part time activity, or in households with several adult members, that some of the members work full time in agriculture, while others seek for outside agriculture employment. Especially in areas, where irrigation is not possible, agriculture is perceived more and more as a part time activity or absorbs the labour force with low or no opportunity costs. This makes rainfed agriculture increasingly a domain for women and the elderly. Where water for irrigation is available, the achievable income from agriculture compared to that of outside agriculture employment still play a major role for the household's decision on full time or part time farming.

The number of farm households, relying entirely on agriculture for their livelihoods has decreased over the last decades. Full time farmers are mostly in possess of economic capital in form of land, water and/or investment capital. This means, they are able to cultivate large areas of land with different crops, in order to minimise risk, or to intensify production on a small area and maximise the outcome through technical innovation. The ownership of land and water is also perceived as an insurance, because it offers the option of renting or selling, although in case of land, the option of selling is unpopular. Irrigated agriculture is generally market oriented and decisions concerning cultivation are taken by the farmer under economic and market considerations. Other household members may influence farm decisions, especially when it comes to labour requirements and investments. The higher the level of intensity and mechanisation of the farm, the more it takes the characteristics of an enterprise, where the unit of household and farm becomes separated and decisions concerning the farm are no longer taken by the household, but by single members responsible for the farm.

Another category of households who rely on agriculture as main source of livelihoods are the resource poor families, as for example, refugees, families with a high number of dependants or women headed households. For them, share cropping gives a relative level of security, because the farm inputs are shared with the landlord and thus no high investments are required, additionally part of the production can be consumed in the household, decreasing the amount of cash needed within the household. For these families it is very difficult however to accumulate assets, and to overcome the marginal level through agricultural activities. Their 'capital' lays in the children, who, when grown up are expected to contribute to the household income by working outside agriculture.

Part-time farming is stable in numbers and even augmenting in times of political crisis. In irrigated areas part time farming is an interesting economic option to create additional cash income, and therefore attracts also younger people. The limiting factor here is after all the availability of irrigation water. Rainfed agriculture on the other hand offers only low rates of return per labour unit. Household members involved in rainfed ag-

riculture are often outside the labour market, thus labour is not considered an economic factor. For the older generation, the attachment to the land, food security and consumption preferences are motives to continue with the traditional way of farming. The exception among the rainfed crops is the olive. In order to protect the land from confiscation, huge areas in Palestine have been planted with olives out of political reasons. The olive further needs only little care during the year, is highly valued for household consumption and as an additional source of income, and thus is the favourite crop for labour extensive production.

The short term priorities of the households consist of securing livelihoods through income and crop diversification and accumulation of economic and social assets. In light of the political and economic climate, with low agricultural income and high level of insecurity regarding prices, resources, markets etc. a growing number of households does not regard agriculture as their main activity in the long term perspective. Since there is no social insurance, the investment into the children's 'cultural capital' is one option for the parents to plan their future independently from agriculture.

For the young unmarried men the work outside agriculture has considerable social implications. By contributing with a salary to the family income, their position inside the household becomes more powerful. For the young men even more important is the fact, that with the money they earn, they will be able to marry and establish an independent household and thus have more freedom in the choice of their wife, compared to those who continue living in the parents household after marriage. Although the responsibility for different agricultural activities (greenhouses, vegetables, olives) is often divided among the generations, the economic unity of the household remains in place, which is the main reason for young men to leave agriculture.

Conclusion

The sustainability of the Palestinian agriculture is challenged after all by political and social factors. Fluctuating market prices, competition with subsidised Israeli products on the local market and restricted access to export markets lead to unpredictable outcomes of the Palestinian agricultural production for the farm household. The high level of insecurity concerning the income favours a household strategy of income diversification.

The lack of control over resources, respectively land and water, and the continuous arbitrary praxis of land confiscation or closure (for military or infrastructure purposes) of the Israeli occupation administration, further deepens the vulnerability and helplessness of the Palestinian farm household.

The practice of dividing the farm in equal shares among all male offspring caused land fragmentation, which in irrigated areas had been counterbalanced by the intensification of the production through technical innovations. In the rainfed areas and increasingly also in irrigated areas the decreasing amount of land per capita does not allow a household to make a living from agriculture any longer.

Finally, the changing priorities of the young generation, namely the wish for independence from the parents household but also changed consumption preferences, make agriculture less attractive for the younger. For many, work in agriculture is seen as a provisionally solution, unless they find other work.

The availability of outside agriculture work opportunities and the access to the labour market is, on the other hand, widely determined by the political situation. Thus, in times of crisis, when restrictions on movement are in place, and work permissions for Israel are withdrawn, the labour force is drastically reduced and incomes are suspended. Under these conditions, agriculture gains in attractiveness, not only as an economic activity, but also as a means to guarantee food security and to decrease the household's need for cash money.

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