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Workshop 4

Competition over resources, rural poverty and agrarian policies in MENA

directed by

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Workshop abstract

Forces of globalization (especially economic globalization) and policies of economic reform and structural adjustment adopted by most MENA countries have had a great impact on society. As far as the rural areas are concerned, these factors have set in motion processes of rapid social change that are transforming these societies significantly. Change in rural MENA over the last two decades was especially triggered by the liberalization of the land and water markets. These policies have, in general, resulted in the impoverishment of large sectors of the rural population.

This workshop takes “access and control of resources” as a conceptual entry point for examining social change and poverty dynamics in rural MENA. Access to resources as employed here refers to:

- 1) physical resources such as land and water,
- 2) services, knowledge and information,
- 3) spaces and institutions of management and decision-making.

This notion should be considered in connection with notions of capability, poverty and exclusion, an approach that is in line with the work of the Indian economist Amartya Sen. It is in the articulation of these factors that we find the key to analyzing poverty dynamics.

Specific areas of inquiry to be addressed in this workshop include gender, differentiation and stratification; land and resource rights; agrarian and rural relations in the era of globalisation; changing meaning of rurality; and environment and biodiversity. The workshop pays special attention

to vulnerable sectors of the rural population, such as women, small holders and landless peasants, and other marginalised social groups.

Workshop description

Forces of globalization (especially economic globalization) and policies of economic reform and structural adjustment adopted by most MENA countries have had a great impact on society in the region. As far as the rural areas are concerned, these factors have set in motion processes of rapid social change and transformation that are changing the face of rural societies in MENA. These policies have, in general, resulted in the impoverishment of large sectors of the rural population (Abdel Aal 2002; Bach 2002 and Bush 2002). Change in rural MENA over the last two decades was especially triggered by the liberalization of the land and water markets. The clearest illustration of this process can be seen in Egypt in the consequences of Law 96 for 1992 which abolished the tenancy guarantees previously provided by the First Agrarian Reform Act 1952. The full implementation of this law in 1997 resulted in large-scale evictions of male and female farmers who had previously enjoyed access to secure tenancies.

This example illustrates not only the process of impoverishment but also that this type of economic reform was *in effect* a mechanism for changing the “rules of the game” of distribution and access to resources. The proposed workshop takes “access and control of resources” as a conceptual entry point for examining poverty dynamics and social change in rural MENA over the past two decades. Access to resources as employed here refers to 1) physical resources such as land and water 2) services, knowledge and information, and 3) spaces and institutions of management and decision-making. Access is primarily determined by official modes of distribution and redistribution, which function practically through the legal mechanisms of authorization and prohibition. But the notion of access to resources should also be considered in connection with notions of capability, poverty and exclusion, an approach that is in line with the work of the Indian economist Amartya Sen (1981, 1993). It is in the articulation of these factors that we find the key to understanding poverty dynamics. When someone is poor and denied access to spaces of decisions and contestations, as well as to land, water, credit, information, and markets, he or she is in a position of social, economic and political incapacity to act for a better individual and collective access to the other resources. He or she is thus trapped in poverty that continues to reproduce itself.

In the proposed workshop special attention is paid to vulnerable groups of the rural population, such as women, small holders and landless peasants, and other marginalised social groups. The workshop invites participants with research interests in rural MENA. Contributions should ideally be based on empirical case studies and/or providing fresh and innovative approaches to conceptualising rural transformation processes in MENA. Participants with experience or interest in development or activist work are particularly welcome.

The following areas of inquiry outline some of the issues that the workshop seeks to address:

1. Gender, differentiation and stratification

This theme addresses the implications of global economic integration (including national economic reform policies) for patterns of inequality and differentiation in rural society. For example, what are the gender and generational implications of this restructuring process, in terms of access to land, water, and other resources? What are the social and ecological effects of the competition over natural and other resources between traditional farmers and agro-investors?

2. Land and resource Rights

The importance of this issue can be clearly seen in the changing tenure regimes often involving the transfer of specific land rights from one local interest group to another. A similar process is taking place regarding water rights. There is one crucial question in this respect: What does “resource rights” practically mean in the context of MENA; and why does the region lag behind other regions in Africa, Latin America and South Asia when it comes to discourses and practices related to this concept? Are there examples of women’s agency? How to improve the concept of resources rights and the practicing of those rights? How to secure access to resources in relation to two main dimensions: poverty alleviation and rights protection? How to empower the more marginalised specifically poor and women?

3. Agrarian relations in the era of globalisation:

The restructuring of the agricultural sector according to globally dictated directives is inevitably leading to significant changes in agrarian relations in the MENA region as a whole. This raises a host of questions at the political, economic, socio-cultural and legal fronts. Such questions include:

What new tenurial relations may be emerging? How are the pluralistic frameworks of gender and tenure being affected? Will the parameters of the new land market lead to the emergence of new actors on the agrarian scene? What are the new constellations of the land, labour, credit, capital and water markets? What are the constraints and possibilities offered by the new state policies and the consequences of global economic integration? What are the developments in the field of dispute and conflict resolution? How are transformations brought about by forces of globalisation played out at the local level?

4. Changing meaning of rurality:

Questions raised here include: what are the characteristics of rural space under conditions of encroaching urbanisation and industrialisation? What are the physical, environmental and cultural implications of the increasingly blurred boundaries between village and city? What transformations are taking place in the relationship between agriculture and rurality, both regarding emerging non-agricultural occupations for village dwellers and emerging agricultural spaces that are not supported by a rural community? How do the new options and choices in the context of land scarcity contribute to changing the structure and processes of land acquisition? What are some of the options (and spaces) available to women in this context?

5. Environment and biodiversity

Despite an increasing awareness of the importance of environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation, these issues do not form a significant part of the social science research agenda in MENA countries. These issues are of utmost importance and are directly linked to the future of agriculture in the region. Some questions raised in this respect are: Is investment agriculture sustainable? What are the long-term consequences of over-use of natural resources? What is the social and ecological impact of encroaching urbanisation and industrialization? What are the implications for the biodiversity in the region, given the rapidly increasing reliance on hybrid seed varieties?

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