

Peasant Farming, A Buffer for Human Societies

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1 **TITLE:** Peasant Farming, A Buffer for Human Societies

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19 **ABSTRACT**

20

21 This article explores the importance of peasant farming worldwide, the debate about its
22 disappearance and the way it is being impacted by differentiated policies. It takes two
23 examples, Tunisia and Egypt, during post-colonial times. In both cases policies tended to
24 favour the modernization of agriculture, ignoring the contribution of peasant farming to the
25 national economies. But interestingly the data show a surprisingly significant importance
26 and increase in the number of small farms in both countries. While theoretical debates
27 continue about the disappearance of peasantries, reality demonstrates that peasant
28 farming is a formidable and resilient buffer for human societies, which helps stabilize,
29 balance and enrich them.

30

31

32

33 **KEYWORDS:** peasants; policies; Tunisia; Egypt; rural development; agriculture

34

35

36 **Introduction**

37

38 The debate about the place of peasant farming in human societies remains more
39 relevant than ever. A number of grey areas persist as to what peasant farming actually
40 is. We have chosen here to explore and analyze how peasant communities have
41 reacted to a series of differentiated policies during four decades from the sixties to the
42 nineties in two countries, Tunisia and Egypt, to try to understand how these policies
43 have impacted peasant communities on the field, and which coping mechanisms have
44 been developed. This is with a view to increasing the available knowledge about this
45 form of agriculture, to better understand how it compares to other forms of farming
46 and to explore how it has contributed to national economies. The lessons learned serve
47 as a powerful instrument that can inform future policies.

48 Before entering the analysis *per se*, we briefly say a few words about the importance
49 of peasant farming worldwide and about the debate on the forecasted disappearance of
50 peasantries in modern societies.

51

52 **Peasant farming is present all around the world**

53

54 Though official statistics do not record peasant farming as such, figures on small farms have
55 been used to understand its importance and distribution. Beginning in 1950, the FAO World
56 Programme for the Census of Agriculture (WCA) has been supporting countries to carry out
57 their national agricultural census, using standard international concepts, definitions and
58 methodologies. These data were analyzed in previous works (Hilmi, 2012), over three
59 decades, 1970–2000, and have shown that there has been an increase of 91 percent of the
60 number of small farms under 2 ha during this period of time, and that small farms represent
61 85 percent of all the farms of the world. The very small farms are usually not recorded in the
62 statistical census, which means that the importance of peasant farming is even higher than
63 what is recorded in the statistics.

64

65 In addition, numerous organizations (ETC Group, 2009; IAASTD, 2009; UNEP, 2011;
66 Development Fund, 2011; HLPE, 2013) have written about the importance of small food
67 producers, including peasants, producing 70 percent of the world's foods, with 80 percent
68 being consumed locally. Beyond food, another characteristic of peasant farming is the
69 provision of labour. The World Agriculture Census reports reflect systematically, over the
70 years, the fact that farms remain a large source of employment. For example, China in the
71 2000 WCA, reports 519 million household members engaged in agriculture on 193 million
72 holdings with 800 million persons, an average of 2.7 household members per farm, with
73 each household composed of four persons.

74

75 **The debate about the permanence or disappearance of peasants continues today**

76

77 While figures demonstrate that peasants remain present in all the countries of the world,
78 and that their number is increasing, a dominant paradigm, since the 1970s, has been one of
79 modernization, with the idea that peasants would gradually be replaced by farmers,
80 understood as agricultural entrepreneurs. The debate about disappearance of the
81 peasantries, or otherwise, is not a recent one. It has been going on for decades, and has

82 been the centre of heated debate in the development fora especially during the 1980s. A
83 brief overview of the literature helps understand how it has been unfolding.

84

85 The importance of peasants was recognized early on in the literature. Peasants are referred
86 to as the 'silent and invisible world that exist below the market economy' (Braudel, 1967).
87 Chayanov (1925) predicted a 'shift of power into peasant hands'. Significant works (Thomas
88 and Znaniecki, 1918; Thorner, 1956; Wolf, 1969) in empirical sociology, history,
89 anthropology, economics have shown their importance, struggles and forms of resistance
90 across centuries and continents, with differing views on the ways subaltern people resist
91 dominance (Scott, 1976; Popkin, 1979).

92

93 Starting in the seventies, and as part of the modernization paradigm, the issue of the
94 disappearance of the peasantry was debated, with the implicit idea that the natural process
95 of modernization would transform agriculture into industrial farming, and that subsistence
96 farming would gradually recede. Thus the 'death of peasantry' or depeasantization was
97 predicted (Hobsbawm, 1994; Bryceson, 1999) with the idea of development as a necessary
98 process, and as a matter of ordered social reform, that removed dysfunctional elements,
99 included in which was the peasantry (Hoogvelt, 2001). Discrepancies on the definitions kept
100 the debate alive, with those arguing that the peasant way of life would continue despite
101 increased urbanization (Johnson, 2004), or lack of direct ownership (Araghi, 1995), and that
102 its permanence is due to the fact that the peasant mode of production is geared to the
103 satisfaction of family needs and not to profit per se, a radical distinction to the capitalistic
104 form of production (Bernstein, 2000). Overall, the commonly implicit and accepted idea,
105 already present in the works of Marx and Engels, however was that, for civilization to
106 progress, the peasantry must dissolve, as society moves from a traditional to a modern
107 state. This view has largely influenced development theorists and the national and regional
108 policies that derived.

109

110 More recently, the construction of peasant theory (Ploeg, 2008) brings back a Chayanovian
111 perspective on peasants and takes the debate to a radically new direction with the
112 understanding of the fundamental differences between the peasant way of farming (based
113 upon the sustainable use of ecological capital) and other modes of agricultural production,
114 i.e. entrepreneurial agriculture (built upon financial and industrial capital-credit, industrial
115 inputs, technologies) which aims at increasing profit and corporate or capitalist farming
116 (which follows an agro-export model). Peasant agriculture is understood as a struggle for
117 autonomy in a context of dependency relations and marginalization. Peasant farming as
118 self-controlled and managed resource base (including land) allows for co-production with
119 living nature, and interaction with the market. A form of farming that feeds back into
120 strengthening the resource base: what is produced returns to the farm or is sold in the
121 market. Its primary aim is livelihoods, and it embeds many functions beyond food.
122 Whenever possible, it is the family that owns, or has user rights on the land and other
123 means of production, and the family members who work on the farm.

124

125 Thus, new theory, and a contemporary perspective on repeasantization, has contributed to
126 pushing aside the previous idea of disappearance, but the word 'peasant' remains heavily
127 loaded with negative connotations and preconceptions. Science itself has often contributed
128 to making peasant farming invisible, bringing forward an ideal model of what the

129 agricultural entrepreneur should be, and obscuring the way in which peasants do operate
130 today in the countryside.

131

132 Building on the above, we propose to look closer into how peasant communities do operate,
133 and into the way they have reacted to the waves of different public policies, resisting or
134 moving along, to see the role they play in our societies. Particular to this analysis is the fact
135 that, more often than not, policymakers don't know about, or, have a conscious, or
136 unconscious prejudice against the peasant way of farming, inherited from the mental lock-in
137 of the 1970s, framed within the modernization paradigm. Thus, what we will see here, is the
138 positive or negative unexpected spin-offs on peasant communities, rather than the impact
139 of planned proactive strategies dedicated to peasants. This will be of particular interest in
140 that it allows us to learn from what unfolds in the countries, from the impacts that arise
141 sometimes despite policies and from the reactions of communities themselves: A perfect
142 laboratory for reflecting on new paths for the future.

143

144 **Tunisia and Egypt from the 1960s to the 1990s, two opposed evolutions grounded in the** 145 **same reality**

146

147 Tunisia and Egypt have been chosen as comparable, but also distinct territories, in terms of
148 geographies and histories, both countries having very clear examples of policy impacts on
149 their peasant communities. The period of time is chosen here as illustrative of an interesting
150 set of clear-cut differentiated waves of policies, often contradictory in their essence, that
151 reflect the world politics of the time: post-colonial policies, liberal and proindustrialization
152 policies, structural adjustment programmes, integrated rural development and agrarian law.
153 These waves unfold differently in these two countries, and it is these very differences that
154 will inform our analysis.

155

156 *Tunisia, an economy boosted by the increase in the number of small farms*

157

158 In Tunisia, in 1996, the Ministry of Agriculture published the results of the national 1994–
159 1995 census, and was puzzled about the exceptional increase in the number of holdings (44
160 percent) since 1962, and the fact that this increase was, for 90 percent of the cases, for
161 farms under 5 hectares. In the meantime, total population doubled (from 4.2 to 8.7 million)
162 and the land available per person declined from 1.2 to 0.6 ha. Research works (Abaab and
163 Elloumi, 2001) find that despite the increase in the number of holdings, Tunisian agriculture
164 performed exceptionally well. What happened? Let us backtrack into the years before.

165

166 1960–1969 is the time of imposed cooperatives and agriculture as the motor of the national
167 economy. The idea was to bring together small and big producers on large holdings
168 recovered from colonial land and modernize agriculture to finance national development.
169 The process was a top-down authoritarian one to which peasants reacted with hostility. The
170 result was policies that favoured large holdings and a dismantlement of subsistence farming
171 followed by a migration wave of landless farmers to the cities and abroad (essentially France
172 and Germany). During those years, peasant farming was squeezed, and peasants were
173 evicted from their lands.

174

175 In the 1970s, with industry as motor of the national economy, acknowledging the failure of
176 the previous decade, the government opened to international markets. Prices of food were
177 low, inputs subsidized, investments encouraged with delivery of credit conditional to the
178 adoption of modern technology. Large holdings were favoured and production modernized.
179 Small farms were again marginalized, with credit and technologies inaccessible for
180 smallholders. Migrations of peasants expanded further to other European and Arab
181 countries.

182
183 With the 1980s came the structural adjustment policies. The country could no longer
184 subsidize inputs to produce cheap food. The financial crisis deepened and reached the
185 industrial sector. The situation worsened with the border restrictions which affected the
186 incoming of remittances coming from abroad. Structural adjustment policies had the effect
187 to further dismantling social safety nets.

188
189 Alarmed by the deterioration of living conditions and the rapid increase of poverty rates in
190 both rural and urban context, public authorities took a radical U-turn, and reoriented
191 development policies towards rural territories. The next ten years were dedicated to the
192 implementation of integrated rural development programmes (road infrastructure,
193 transport, drinking water, electrification, etc.). Rural areas became attractive and the
194 migration movement was reversed, as, in contrast, industrial as well as overseas
195 opportunities diminished. This was the time of the return of peasants to their home villages
196 and a wave of newcomers to the countryside, benefitting from new opportunities and
197 better living conditions.

198
199 As a result, between the end of the 1980s and the years 2000, the poverty rate decreased
200 from 13 to 4.2 percent, with 36.4 percent of the population living in rural areas. Poverty rate
201 in rural areas became half that of urban area (National Statistics Institute 2000 data).
202 Pluriactivity of heads of farm holdings remained high (43 percent) reflecting a high level of
203 articulation with the rest of the economy. Family labour became available on farm (more
204 than 1.1 million family members participating to farming activities). Investment increased,
205 mainly in the form of auto-financing (only 7.5 percent of farmers requested credit).

206
207 The case of Tunisia is particularly interesting in that it demonstrates a series of action–
208 reaction attitudes of peasant communities to the national policies imposed upon them.
209 Firstly, we can see that peasants have no say in those policies, but that they are directly
210 impacted by them. Secondly, we realize that depending on the types of policies, these
211 alternatively marginalize or encourage peasant farming, somehow by default, so to say, as
212 these policies are not geared to peasant farming per se, but to the growth of national
213 economy. This is done firstly by policymaking geared to agricultural growth (large holdings
214 inherited from colonial times), then by industrial development, later by applying the
215 structural adjustment, and finally taking a U-turn towards improving infrastructure in the
216 rural areas. Under these contradictory waves that have pushed them back and forth within
217 the country and abroad, peasants have resisted and adapted, using a range of coping
218 strategies including labour in the industrial sector, intensification and diversification on
219 farm, auto-financing, pluriactivity and migration abroad. There is a recurrent theme
220 underlying the governmental policies since the sixties, and that is modernization and the
221 favouring of large holdings. This explains the surprise at the outcome of the national

222 statistics that showed a concomitant increase in the number of small farms while at the
223 same time the national economic indicators improved and poverty was reduced. This is due
224 to the significant shift that happened in the 1980s with a clear focus on developing rural
225 territories with a resulting reversed migration towards rural areas which then became more
226 attractive than the cities. The agricultural sector performs exceptionally well and our
227 interpretation is that this is thanks to, and not despite, the increase of the number of small
228 holdings.

229

230 *Egypt, policies that dismantle the most efficient farming systems in the world*

231

232 If we now look into the case of Egypt, during the same period of time, a 1990 census shows
233 that 99.9 percent of the farms are family farms concentrated on the Nile Valley. Most of the
234 land is cultivated by the owner or leaser and by his/her family members. A study
235 undertaken in the 1990s (Roudart, 2001) shows that 78 percent of the farms are under 1.26
236 ha and 36 percent even less than 0.42 ha. The mean size is 0.5 ha. These small-sized
237 holdings have been able to produce enough food to cover the needs of a population close to
238 60 million. An astounding record. How did this happen?

239

240 The agrarian systems of the Nile Valley are a model of intensive agriculture which reaches
241 productivity levels beyond the highest world records (FAOSTAT, 1990): 5.7 tons per ha for
242 wheat, 7.4 tons per ha for maize, 8.4 tons per ha for rice in 1995–1998; 6.4 tons per ha, 7.9
243 tons per ha and 10 tons, respectively, in 2009, higher than the yields of the Netherlands,
244 France and the USA during the same period of time. In addition, the total output per
245 hectare in this multicrop systems is higher than any monoculture systems and is
246 characterized by a high level of diversity in terms of crops, fruit trees and animals per unit of
247 land. These farming systems are based on the intensification practices, the renewal of soil
248 fertility and the use of small-scale machinery used on collective basis (for soil preparation,
249 water pumping, grain threshing, etc.), with a mean of one tractor per 26 ha (FAOSTAT,
250 1990), as compared to one tractor per 48 ha in France or one per 90 ha in the US.
251 Depending on the soil qualities, a plot of 0.5–1.3 ha is sufficient to sustain a family and to
252 prepare for the following farming cycle.

253

254 Starting in 1992, a radical change occurs. The 1992 agrarian law (Land Law N. 96) tripled the
255 price of leases, and on 6 October 1997, the land market was liberalized, a change of policy
256 that lead to the collapse of this extraordinarily intensive systems built over millennia. All
257 leases were abruptly terminated, bringing to an end the security of tenure, a fundamental
258 right under the Nasser 1952 agrarian reform law which had made possible these uniquely
259 efficient farming systems. With the 1952 law, the Nasser government had protected the
260 landless farmers and small producers with sharecropping rules favourable to the tenants,
261 securing rights through lifetime leases which could be transmitted to the descendants. This
262 translated into 430.000 farmers who were full tenants (rent or sharecropping) and 470.000
263 who had a mixed tenancy with only a part under direct ownership. The abrupt termination
264 of these leases lead to massive street riots which were harshly repressed. Farmers who lost
265 their access rights, were instead offered plots of land in the Sinai desert. Policy authorities
266 justified this necessary change by the need to modernize agriculture, and to put land into
267 the capital markets (assuming that land offer would increase, and prices drop). Instead, the
268 land market became paralyzed and the lands were degraded by the interruption of long-

269 term renewal of soil fertility. Labour arrangements became precarious, leases shortened
270 and became insecure discouraging long-term investments. Further studies reflected a
271 deterioration of the standards of living (Saber, 2006).

272

273 The case of Egypt shows something that very few people are aware of. That is that the
274 evolution of the farming systems in the Nile Valley has produced the most efficient farming
275 systems in the world, with yields exceeding those of the most industrialized countries. We
276 are not talking here about labour productivity, a mistake often leading to misinterpretation,
277 but of productivity per unit of land or labour object (cow, etc.). It is of course known that
278 the Nile Valley was fertile, with its renowned silts, but less known is that the rights system,
279 social, labour, assets (land, animals and machinery) rights inherited from the Nasser times,
280 was amongst the most modern of the world, which in addition, and totally ignored by the
281 scientific community, was a risk-sharing mechanism for investment with shareholding
282 informal agreements (payments in the form of percentage of harvest, flexible enough to
283 allow the renewal of the means of production each coming year), based on the Arabic
284 system. In effect, grounded on religious beliefs, the Arab societies forbid the receiving of
285 interest rates and have developed other informal systems based on trust and reciprocity for
286 investment, thus avoiding the excessive indebtedness that occurs elsewhere as a major
287 bottleneck to investment in small holdings. A third fundamental component of this success,
288 in addition to ecological intensification in farming, and access to means and investment, is
289 the mix and balance of individual and collective work. Farmers work on their individual plots
290 of land, and share sophisticated social collective arrangements for the use of water and
291 maintenance of water canals, and the use of small mechanization, thus attaining the most
292 efficient production systems in an ever-evolving fashion.

293

294 Again here, as in the case of Tunisia, we have policies that do not take into account the
295 peasant way of farming per se, and which stem from the modernization paradigm with the
296 idea that agricultural profit is obtained through the use of financial and industrial capital,
297 and where land is seen as a financial asset comparable to any other. The reality on the
298 ground has demonstrated that the land market, when liberalized, does not work as
299 expected, and instead the market freezes with social actors preferring to keep the land even
300 when idle. Critical in this case is to witness the effects of the dismantlement of the rights
301 access, a fundamental pillar of peasant farming, with the effect of social degradation,
302 poverty increase and the loss of long-term environmental sustainability as the renewal of
303 soil fertility is no longer insured.

304

305 **Discussion: when peasant farming plays a buffer role for national economies**

306

307 The analysis of these two countries shows some common characteristics: in both Tunisia
308 and Egypt, peasant farming has contributed to producing food for the rural and urban
309 populations, and has been a buffer against adversity. When policies have provided an
310 enabling environment, such as land security or integrated rural development, the effect has
311 been less poverty, more social cohesion and intensification of production. In these two
312 countries we have opposed movements grounded on the same dynamics. In one case,
313 Tunisia, peasants alternatively resist (forced cooperatives, structural adjustment) and thrive
314 (territory and rural development); on the other side, Egypt, peasants prosper (Nasser 1952
315 land tenure legislation and struggle (1992 Land Law N.96)). These changes have long-term

316 consequences on the natural resources (water and soil management). In both cases the
317 dominant discourse from public authorities has been one of modernization of agriculture,
318 failing to acknowledge the role of peasant farming, as contributing to the nation's
319 prosperity. There is an intellectual lock-in about the negative perception of the peasant
320 figure in societies, still considered backward, unproductive and meant to disappear.

321
322 In these examples, and more particularly in Egypt, there is an inability to realize the fact that
323 peasants are able to produce in abundance. Peasant farming is often equated to poverty.
324 But if we return the equation, we realize that while peasant farming can be practiced in
325 difficult areas where other forms of agriculture fail to take place (steep hills, remote areas,
326 marginal lands, etc.), it can also favourably strive compared to other forms of agriculture
327 when good conditions avail. Hence, peasant farming is not identical to the often assumed
328 distribution of poverty. The places where intensification is blocked are not intrinsic to
329 peasant farming, on the contrary, as we have observed in Egypt, peasant farming produces
330 the highest total amount of gross value added, not only because the total production per
331 unit of area is higher, but also because gross value added represents a larger part of gross
332 value produced, as peasants are less dependent on outside inputs, thus generating more
333 income. At the level of the country as is demonstrated in Tunisia, this translates into an
334 increase of the agricultural contribution to the national economy and an increase of the
335 national wealth (as reported by national statistics on the increase of small farms and
336 positive indicators on agricultural production).

337
338 The coping strategies observed in both cases show that peasant farming plays the role of
339 buffer and catalyst for national economies both when conditions deteriorate and when
340 conditions are favourable. A key consideration, often ignored, is that peasant farming is a
341 formidable cradle for labour. When unemployment hits, people find opportunities for
342 employment and livelihoods in the countryside. Farmers who left the land, having had to
343 migrate for one reason or the other, maintain the link and return to their land or village,
344 when conditions improve. The same applies for the newcomers, new peasants, in search of
345 better life conditions and a livelihood in the rural areas.

346 347 **Conclusion**

348
349 To conclude, what we learn from the analysis of these two case studies is that when
350 conditions avail (integrated approaches, security of tenure) intensity of farming brings high
351 productivity per unit of land, and even very small plots can sustain a family and provide a
352 decent life, while at the same time insuring the next production cycle. Secure access, as well
353 as social and labour rights, is a key prerequisite to allow for the potential of value creation
354 to be unleashed. Farming can only be understood in the long term as it deals with living
355 systems (above and below ground) that take long time to be established. In addition, a
356 complementarity of individual and collective approaches is the most efficient combination
357 for agricultural production, and, land does not work as other assets in the capital markets.

358
359 When we look at four decades of policies in Tunisia and Egypt we can marvel at the
360 resilience of the peasant way of farming. Waves of migrations within or outside the
361 countries have accompanied contradictory policies unfolding during these different stages.
362 In every case, peasant communities have played a buffer role, able to alternatively absorb

363 newcomers (when poverty hits in town) and to provide labour to the other sectors of the
364 economy when being marginalized and struggling to compete against facilities provided to
365 the large holdings to which they have no access. It would be interesting for policymakers to
366 reframe future policies taking into account what these field examples show and to imagine
367 what could be the contribution of peasant farming to human societies if there were policies
368 that would be directly dedicated to this form of agriculture: A new challenge to embrace for
369 the future.

370

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