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TWENTY YEARS
OF
DEVELOPMENT
IN EGYPT
1977-1997

TWENTY YEARS OF DESERT DEVELOPMENT IN EGYPT ¹

SORAYA ALTORKI and DONALD P. COLE

Desert development, as understood in Egypt, refers to a process of land reclamation leading to the horizontal expansion of agriculture out of the Nile valley and delta and into the desert. The 1952 Revolution ushered in this process on a large scale, and the period of the 1950s and 1960s was "the golden age of [desert] land reclamation" (Bishay 1993:302). About 900,000 feddans were reclaimed, mainly in desert areas adjacent to or very near the Nile region. This national project involved massive construction of physical infrastructure, the creation of new and the expansion of old bureaucracies, and a vast mobilization of workers, potential settlers, and other people. Moreover, desert development in the 1950s and 1960s was undertaken with great enthusiasm and high hopes for creating a New Egypt in the desert.

However, the public land reclamation of those decades was a great disappointment to many. Large areas of land that had been prepared for agriculture were never cultivated or were abandoned after a few seasons. Most settlements in the new lands in the 1970s were bleak. Life was harsh for the few people who persevered in them, and no bright future beckoned. Yet, in retrospect, the 1970s constituted a period of transition in Egypt's desert development. Almost no additional land was reclaimed. Moreover, evaluation studies of desert land reclamation by influential foreign consultants (e.g., Voll 1980; Hunting Technical Services 1979; and Pacific Consultants 1980) all came to the same conclusion: desert development is not economically viable. The costs of reclamation are too high and the yields too low to warrant further investment. This negative view of desert development was affirmed by Dames and Moore later on (1985) in their influential consultant's report and recommendations for the development of

¹ Material presented here also appears in *Bedouin, Settlers, and Holiday-Makers: Egypt's Changing Northwest Coast*, by Donald P. Cole and Soraya Altorki (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998).

Sinai upon its return to Egypt following the Jewish state's military occupation of the desert peninsula.

Nonetheless, desert development was not abandoned by the Egyptian state or by individual Egyptian citizens, although fundamental changes were introduced. Land holdings in the reclaimed areas began to be privatized. New technologies and practices in desert agriculture were introduced. Plans for new cities in the desert were formulated. Private sector expansion of tourism into desert coastal areas was encouraged. Major improvements in highways, roads, telecommunications, and the electricity supply system were initiated. These innovations have roots in the *Infitah*, or open door policy, proclaimed in 1974 by President Anwar Sadat. These changes fostered a new phase of desert development, which has flourished during the past twenty years, since the late 1970s. This new desert development, which is the subject of this paper, has involved especially privatization and an expansive mix of new economic activities in the desert. These changes, moreover, have mushroomed into a desert development boom which has been sustained since around 1985.

During the transition in the 1970s, reclaimed lands held and managed by public sector companies began to be distributed among various categories of landholders. These include: small holders, often from among the original workers on the old projects, with three to five or six feddans of land; white collar employees of public sector companies with holdings of between fifteen and twenty feddans; and graduates of agricultural secondary schools and of universities with distributions of twenty and thirty feddans, respectively. Cooperatives of various sorts were also granted areas for distribution to their members; and large tracts of land were sold, usually by auction, to private individuals and companies. Meanwhile, the public sector companies retained land which they continued to manage and farm (Voll 1980:144; Sukkary-Stolba 1985:183; Johnson and Lintner 1985:256-257; Hopkins et al. 1988:14-15).

Some land holdings were fully privatized, as their owners obtained deeds from the state indicating ownership of the land as *mulk* (private property). Small holders usually obtained their plots under leasehold, while the graduates and employees bought leases to the land with long-term mortgages extended by the state. Whether or not they obtained outright private

ownership of the land, the new landholders--small, medium, and large--were all on their own to make use of the land as they saw fit, with mixed results.

Agronomist Muhammad °Atif Kishk (1994:5) emphasizes that the conversion of reclaimed lands from state or public sector management to private or semi-private holdings occurred piecemeal and notes that the first distribution was to landless farmers from the Nile region. Later on, a decision was made to distribute some of the land to agronomists. Still later, public sector companies faced with deficits decided to sell part of the land "by auction to anyone who could afford to buy it whether he intends to cultivate it, lease it, or sell it." According to Kishk, "certain well-placed social categories," such as military and police officers, judges, and university professors became owners of parts of the reclaimed land "for cultivation or commercial purposes." Finally, in an attempt to remedy unemployment among university graduates, "the authorities distributed large areas... to [graduates]."

Kishk laments that decisions about Egypt's desert land reclamation process have seldom been based on a thorough and comprehensive analysis of all relevant facts but have been taken in response to changing political pressures emanating from within the Nile Valley. In his words,

These policies had their supporters and opponents, as well as their advantages and shortcomings, but there was no appropriate follow-up to allow for sound assessment. I would not be exaggerating or off-track if I said that approval or disapproval of such policies has been, and still is, a matter of opinion rather than a matter of data, information and facts based on [a] sound scientific approach (ibid:6).

It should be stressed that people who obtained reclaimed land benefited from the massive investments of the state and the labor of thousands of *tarahil* (migrant rural workers) during the 1950s and 1960s. Many who obtained land have encountered constraints in the forms of inadequate credit facilities, irregular water supply, and difficulties in marketing, obtaining inputs, and access to expertise and new technologies. However, without the basic infrastructure already in place, they could not have developed their farms. Some of these constraints have eased, and many of these landholders contribute to the boom that has characterized desert development in recent years.

Small holders have generally dedicated themselves with a passion to desert farming and are widely credited with high net returns per feddan cultivated. Production on lands distributed to graduates has had mixed results. Many of the graduates are rightly accused of not being serious, of neglecting the land they have acquired, and of trying to farm it as absentee owners. However, examples exist of hard work and dedication on the part of graduates and of resultant success. Significant failures have occurred among private investors who obtained relatively large tracts of land. However, investors with good access to financial capital, state-of-the-art technologies and expertise, and good management have achieved high levels of output and say they are satisfied with the returns on their investments (Sherbiny, Cole, and Girgis 1992:77-81; Bishay 1993:321-327; 333-338; Fitch 1994).

The new desert agriculture has expanded rapidly since the mid-1980s. Private individuals and companies have rushed to buy both reclaimed and unreclaimed desert land. Hundreds of new farms, large and small, have been developed. Specialized private companies have mushroomed to provide modern desert irrigation systems and other requirements for new desert agriculture. Meanwhile, the state has re-initiated public reclamation projects by extending Nile water, through the as-Salam canal, into north Sinai in the east and, through the al-Nubariya canal, almost to al-^cAlamain in the west. About 600,000 feddans have been officially reclaimed since 1980; furthermore, the state calls, through its Tushka project in the late 1990s, for a new delta in the country's remote desert southwest and for new life in what is by now the old Wadi al-Gadid, or New Valley.

The creation of planned cities in the desert has added a major new dimension to desert development that goes beyond the prevailing practice--and discourse--of equating desert development with desert land reclamation for crop production. The Tenth of Ramadan, the Sixth of October, and the Fifteenth of May have been developed since the late 1970s on desert lands east and west of Cairo. Sadat City was set up in the desert about halfway between Cairo and Alexandria, while New Nubariya, New ^cAmriya, and New Burj al-^cArab exist on desert sites near Alexandria.

These new cities were designed mainly as industrial centers, although agriculture and other activities were included in some cases such as Sadat City. Specifically designated as locations for private sector joint-ventures established under the *Infitah*, the growth of their industrial bases started off

slowly. However, these new desert cities increasingly attract significant numbers of factories, some of which are joint-venture establishments or form part of the military-production complex, while many others are owned by local Egyptian capitalists. These factories employ large numbers of both men and women workers from Cairo, Alexandria, and nearby communities in the Nile region.

The new cities have large stocks of housing, usually designed for low, middle, and high-income occupants. However, much of this housing remains vacant despite a major shortage of housing in the Nile region. Many workers and most employers commute from their old communities, as the workers usually cannot afford the new housing built especially for them and the employers prefer to remain in their old residences in the main cities of Cairo and Alexandria (see Meyer 1989; Sewall 1992:103-115). However, the cities are maturing and increasingly attract residents, including people who now live there and commute to work in the Nile region. Also, non-industrial enterprises are beginning to locate in the new cities. These include trade and other service establishments, but also private schools which find their uncrowded space a major asset--among which we can now list the American University in Cairo. At the same time, spontaneous growth started in numerous unplanned desert towns. Two examples are Wadi Natrun and Badr, both of which have mushroomed in size since the early 1980s. Informal trade and other services, once severely limited in the old reclamation projects and in the new cities when they were first built, have especially expanded in the unplanned desert towns.

Private sector tourism development was also added to the desert development matrix and has involved large-scale construction of hotels, tourist villages, and a huge stock of private holiday apartments, chalets, and villas on or near desert beaches. Moreover, numerous new enterprises have sprung up along the new desert highways that link Cairo to Ismailia, to Suez, and to Alexandria and also along the new desert ring road that circles Cairo. New highways, new cities, new factories, and new tourism facilities have engaged the construction sector on a massive scale. Not surprisingly, construction contributes to the current boom in desert development, as both large-scale and small-scale contractors have rushed to build in the desert.

Our reading of the more than forty-year-old desert development experience in areas near the Nile Valley stresses that the role of the Egyptian

state has been enormous. The state opened these areas to development by providing basic infrastructure in the form of canals and pumping stations, roads and highways, electricity, planned settlements in land reclamation areas and the new cities, and the creation of industrial zones. The quality, appropriateness, and maintenance of this infrastructure is subject to critical evaluation. However, without the state's contribution in this regard, these areas would probably still be closed to settlement and to agriculture, industry, and most other economic activities.

The role of Egyptian people also has been enormous, as their knowledge and institutional arrangements--their culture and society--have shaped the development in multiple ways. Many newcomers have struggled in an unfamiliar environment with little or no technical advice from experts and with a minimum of effective support from financial institutions. They also have confronted numerous rules and regulations set forth by bureaucracies and even the military, which has primary legal rights to undeveloped land in the deserts of Egypt. Some of the newcomers failed to achieve their goals and abandoned the desert. Others have survived as a result of an informal process of trial and error and by copying apparent successes achieved by others.

Observation and results of partial surveys, such as the Sherbiny, Cole, and Girgis (1992) study, support these conclusions and suggest others. People from the Nile region predominate in this desert development and come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds: retired military officers and well-to-do businessmen, upper middle class professionals and lower middle class employees, urban and rural workers, small-scale farmers from villages, and traders from small towns and cities. University graduates and the illiterate are there, as are both Muslims and Christians. Socially, the new desert development mirrors Egypt's Nile region to a significant degree--but without major unemployment or the very poor. Data also show that Egypt's desert-based Bedouin, once excluded from the early projects, are now engaged alongside their compatriots from the Nile region in many aspects of the more recent desert development (ibid:13-18).

The desert has new settlers, along with commuters and absentee investors. Individuals, families, civil associations or cooperatives, and companies moved quickly once the state relaxed central control of development activities in these areas about twenty years ago. Job

opportunities attracted workers. Tax exemptions and relatively cheap land encouraged investors to risk their capital in the sand. Merchants and traders saw potential sales and came with their goods and services. Survey results suggest that industry especially has provided formal job opportunities. Trade and other services, such as repairs, tend to be small-scale and informal; but they engage increasingly large numbers of people in new desert communities.

The new desert agriculture, whether from the 1950s and 1960s or of more recent vintage, utilizes considerable family labor in the case of small holders. Medium-sized and large desert farms employ modest numbers of men with formal studies in agriculture at secondary school and university levels, along with some full-time farm workers. However, much of the labor required in the new desert agriculture is provided by migrant workers recruited by labor contractors from among residents of old Nile delta and valley communities. These laborers, who include large numbers of women and some children, are transported to the desert farms and work there on a temporary basis to perform specific tasks (*ibid*:29-39; 50-53; 56-58).

Profits and jobs have strongly motivated the new desert development. However, both capitalists and workers also mention lack of crowding, clean air, and quietness as major attractions of the desert. Some people are highly enthusiastic about the future of Egypt's desert development. For example, a man with significant investment in new desert agriculture in South Tahrir commented, "The desert is the only hope for Egypt, for its young people and investment." An industrialist with a factory in Sadat City said, "It is our belief that Egypt is the desert. The Nile Valley was Egypt's past" (quoted in *ibid*:80-81). Meanwhile, Kishk (1994:5) argues that Egyptians see desert development "as a matter of life and death, the success or feasibility of which should not be assessed in terms of narrow professional criteria of economic feasibility studies." Despite the hyperbole, these views suggest the importance of desert development to Egypt and its people.

How important is desert development in quantitative terms? To what degree does the new desert agriculture contribute to national food security and at what cost? Which economic activity generates the most jobs or has the greatest potential to draw new settlers into desert communities? How many people have migrated from the Nile region and settled there and what is the total population of all people living beyond the flood plain of the Nile in

these desert terrains? Comprehensive data, unfortunately, do not exist to provide precise answers to such questions (see El-Hamamsy 1979:vii; Fitch 1994).

Although not fully recorded on Egypt's statistical map, development in deserts near the Nile region is, however, a reality, as anybody who travels along the desert highway between Cairo and Alexandria will readily note. Trees watered by drip irrigation line long stretches of the way. Lush green fields watered by sprinkler and other modern irrigation systems cover most of the old desert terrain. Large villas, some with massive gates, dot the landscape. Luxurious cafeterias and restaurants have sprung up and attract travelers for a snack or a full meal. Super-modern filling stations are conveniently located along the way and are super-clean, with uniformed attendants. This is not a desert highway anymore, despite its name. Pay phones that work exist every few kilometers. And thousands of cars, many of them air conditioned, speed along the highway unless they are caught in radar traps. Indeed, the only apprehension the Cairene driver of today encounters on the desert highway is being stopped by the police for speeding.

Time does not permit a detailed tour along the back roads of desert development areas near the Nile region. However, anthropologist Nicholas S. Hopkins, et al. (1988:4-6; 53-99) demonstrate that community formation in South Tahrir has advanced from simply a plan put forward by the state, to established communities, each with its own complex local organization and specific identity. A symbolic affirmation of their socio-cultural existence as communities and not just living quarters for transient workers and employees is the creation of local cemeteries and burial associations. The dead are no longer taken back for burial in their communities of origin in the Nile area so that "human sociability among the living [in the new communities is] projected into the world of the dead" (ibid:95).

People here contribute to Egypt's national economy and sustain their own livelihoods. In our estimation, the development that has been achieved is much more than a band-aid or an aspirin for the problems of the Nile valley and delta. Desert development, however, is not the only solution for perceived problems in Egypt. The Nile region is not Egypt's past and the desert its future. Both environments are part of the past and the present. People struggle in both areas to survive amid hopes for a better future and a

growing awareness that Egypt's dependency on a limited supply of water poses a huge question mark for long-term ecological sustainability in the ancient land. Except for meager rainfall in parts of desert Egypt, the country's total water supply in 1990 amounted to 63.5 billion cubic meters, with 55.5 billion from the Nile. The total demand for water in 1990 reached 59.2 billion cubic meters (Abu-Zeid 1994; Bishay 1992:56-59). Meanwhile, demand accelerates--to quench the thirst of a growing population, to meet the needs of expanding industrial and tourism sectors, and to irrigate new fields in the desert.

In conclusion, ours is an anti-essentialist view of Egypt's deserts and desert development. Where many see a vast divide between desert and sown, we see a long history of interaction that has accelerated rapidly in magnitude and in scope. Many see desert development as development of the desert through land reclamation for crop production. We view the process more as development in the desert and see a multiplicity of economic activities and a mixture of formal and informal organization. Where a few see desert development as Nile valley and delta people taking over ancestral lands of the desert Bedouin and where many ignore the Bedouin, we see both categories of people engaged in this process of change.

Some equate desert development with forty-plus years of change in areas near the Nile region, but we see the process also taking place in desert areas far removed from that area and over a much longer span of time--as is the case of Egypt's northwest coast in the governorate of Matruh, where we have recently conducted fieldwork. Finally, Egypt's main desert development has itself undergone significant transformation: firstly, state-sponsored and directed development in the 1950s and 1960s that also included the mobilization and the toil of vast numbers of *tarahil* and other workers; secondly, a transition starting in the 1970s as *Infitah* opened the desert and unleashed private initiatives—for speculation, for projects aimed at sustainable development, and for a wide range of activities in between; and, thirdly, a boom in the desert since around 1985. Will today's boom bust? Or is this boom the other kind of *tufrah*, a word in Arabic which means both boom and mutation? Is the desert development boom a mutation leading to Egypt's adaptive and sustainable use of its desert terrains? We hope the latter; we fear the first.

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