

Assessing USAID's Implementation of a Human Rights-Based Approach: A Comparative Study on Jordan and Palestine's Agricultural Sectors

Zeina Fakhridin

Thousands of years ago, the Middle East was known as the Fertile Crescent and the cradle of civilization, largely lauded for its incredible fertility and advanced agricultural development; from extended irrigation networks to the domestication of livestock. In the 1930s, the Middle East was a net wheat exporter, with Egypt, Iraq and Transjordan as major producers (Woertz, 2014). However, a multitude of complex geopolitical, socioeconomic and environmental issues have led to the brutal decline of the region's renowned agricultural superiority. Consequently, MENA is now considered one of the most food insecure regions globally (Center for International and Regional Studies, 2012).

Both Jordan and Palestine have fallen as casualties to weak agricultural policies and neoliberal-driven economic development strategies that led to the neglect of agriculture. There has been a plethora of development partners, including the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), EuropeAid, among others, deploying a number of projects in an effort to enhance both countries' agricultural sectors. These agencies have attested that their interventions have led to considerable improvements in the agricultural sector with a large number of beneficiaries and an enhancement of farmers' standards of living. However, their efforts have seldom been assessed on whether or not their projects are in fact in line with a rights-based approach that is inclusive, sustainable and truly empowering.

As such, this paper will provide a comparative study on the efforts of development partners, namely USAID, in integrating a human rights-based approach (HBRA) and prosperous growth in the agricultural sector while safeguarding the primary entitlements of smallholder farmers in both Jordan and Palestine.

Current state of agriculture

Jordan

Throughout the late 1990s, an eager focus on economic development and modernization, largely based on the Western model of societal reform, led to an overwhelming neglect of a key source of stability and welfare: the agricultural sector (Baylouny, 2008). As a condition of joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), Jordan began implementing the Agricultural Structural Adjustment Program (ASAP), which was in line with neoliberal policies that favored deregulation and privatization of the sector (Jabarin, 2005; El Saadi, 2017). As such, ASAP led to a major decline in governmental support of the sector through the elimination of agricultural subsidies and incentives, the removal of standard pricing of agricultural commodities, and the placement of interest rates on agricultural loans (EuropeAid, 2012; Jabarin, 2005) The agricultural reform also led to the adoption of an export-led and trade-based food security strategy with an excessive reliance on foreign labor for domestic productivity (Woertz, 2014).

As a result of neglect, Jordan has an incredibly weak infrastructure for post-harvest storage and processing, and has only one agricultural credit institution (Ibid.). Other institutional constraints include the weak farm extension system with considerably limited physical and technical capacity. Today, the sector's contribution to the national GDP stands at a mere 4 percent, a considerable decline from roughly 40 percent in the 1950s (EuropeAid, 2012).

In the 1960s, Jordan's wheat self-sufficiency was at 70 percent, whereas today, the country imports 98 percent of its cereal needs (Santos & Ceccacci, 2015), and in 2011, its food self-sufficiency ratio¹ stood at a mere 53 percent (AFED, 2014). The over-reliance on food imports has exposed Jordan to the vulnerability and volatility of international food supply chains and food prices (AFED, 2014; ESCWA, 2010); Jordan was hit particularly hard by the 2008/09 and the 2011 global food crises² and faces high fiscal and political pressures as a result of its soaring food import bill (Harrigan, 2015).

Environmental and geopolitical challenges

Jordan is one of the top five most water stressed countries in the world (Hadadin, et al., 2010; EuropeAid, 2012), and over 90 percent of the country is classified as arid and receives less than 200 mm of annual rainfall (Ministry of Water & Irrigation, 2016). The limited area fit for cultivation is slowly declining due to urban sprawl and other biophysical constraints, including excessive groundwater extraction, depletion of soil quality, soil salinization, and frequent droughts (UNDP, 2013; EuropeAid, 2012). Furthermore, the progression of climate change in the region and nationally is expected to significantly affect local production (IFAD, FAO & The World Bank, 2009).

While Jordan is widely considered as an oasis of peace surrounded by turmoil, the country has not escaped the consequences of regional war, conflict and occupation.

The aforementioned climatic challenges undoubtedly add pressure to Jordan's natural resources, but it is important to note that the country's resource scarcity is also largely man-made; Jordan's resource crisis has been exacerbated by Israel's water strategy, which relies on the full exploitation of water resources within and largely beyond its boundaries (Stork, 1983). In 1964, Israel's National Water Carrier project had the task of transferring water from the Sea of Galilee to the Negev mainly be allotted to irrigation projects (Bleier, 1994). This required the diversion of water flow from the Jordan River into the Sea of Galilee, which has been deemed as resource appropriation that left Jordan and Syria with brackish, saline water, and has substantially affected local agricultural activity (ibid.).

¹ Self-sufficiency is an indicator of the extent to which a country produces its own food; the higher the ratio, the greater the level of self-sufficiency (FAO, 2015).

² It is important to note that the 2011 global food price crisis that spiked the price of wheat, and subsequently bread, had major political repercussions in the Middle East and North Africa region. There has been ample evidence on the linkages between the aforementioned price hikes and the civil unrest sparked the Arab Spring (Werrell & Femia, 2013; Maystadt, et al., 2014).

In addition, the country has long depended on Syrian and Iraqi markets as both major export destinations and gateways to European markets. Thus the closure of the two markets due to political instability has had dire consequences on agricultural exports. There has been a 35 percent drop in exports compared to the same period in 2016 (Namrouqa, 2017).

Palestine

Similar to the case of Jordan, the Palestinian agricultural sector has witnessed a tragic decline in its contribution to GDP; from roughly 18 percent in the late 1980's, down to a sheer 5.5 by 2010 (Palestinian National Authority, 2010). This again, is largely due to the implementation of poor economic policies and a trade-driven political agenda pushed by international financial institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Samara, 2000).

More notably, however, are the perils of the longstanding Israeli occupation and colonization. The Palestinian food and agricultural systems have been substantially affected by discriminatory policies, resource dispossession and movement restrictions imposed by the State of Israel (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2015).

The confiscation of Palestinian land to facilitate the expansion of the state of Israel has had among the largest detrimental consequences on agriculture (The Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem, 2015). To date, taking into account all land that has been confiscated, Area C of the West Bank that is under full Israeli control³, and the area of land lost as a result of the construction of the Apartheid Wall, considerably less than 15 percent of historical Palestine remains (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Anon., 2011). Moreover, approximately 63 percent of Palestinian agricultural land is located within the Area C zone, deeming the land inaccessible to Palestinian farmers (The Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem, 2008). The situation in Gaza is comparatively worse, where the ten-year long blockade has devastated public infrastructure and disrupted food and agricultural imports. Military imposed 'buffer zones' have rendered 30-40 percent of agricultural arable land, in what was considered as Gaza's food basket, inaccessible (Palestinian Farming and Civil Society Organizations, 2013). This has left 47 percent of its households as food insecure and roughly 80 percent of the population dependent on international aid (UNRWA, 2016).

Another factor significantly affecting agricultural productivity is the alarming disparity in the access to water between Palestinians and Israelis (Amnesty International, 2009). Israel determines the amount of water Palestinians can extract from aquifers, such that Palestinians are limited to 17 percent of the total water in the aquifers, while Israel extracts the remaining 83 percent for consumption and use in settlements or in Israel, or for sale to Palestinians at inflated prices (The World Bank, 2008b; The Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem, 2008).

³ *The Oslo II Accord (1995) divided the West Bank into three administrative categories: Areas A, B and C. The distinct areas differed according to the amount of self-government the Palestinians would have through the Palestinian Authority (Amnesty International, 2009b).*

Development partners case studies

USAID Jordan

For several decades now, a number of development partners committed to support economic growth projects in Jordan. USAID, for instance, has been present in the country since 1957 working on issues of economic development, democracy, rights and governance, health, and female empowerment (USAID, 2017a). Despite its heavily funded involvement in the field of socioeconomic prosperity, the 3-year Hydroponic Green Farming Initiative (HGFI) launched in 2013⁴ is one of the only agricultural endeavors that the development partner has partaken in Jordan; in 2013, USAID had a budget of \$692,394,445 in Jordan, only \$1.1 million of which was allocated to the HGFI.

With hydroponic farming, plants are raised in an indoor nutrient-rich circulated water medium rather than in soil (see figure 1). Compared to conventional farming, hydroponic systems are meant to give higher yields and could be considerably more efficient in terms of water and land (Harris, 1966; Barbosa, et al., 2015). The system has therefore been embraced as a modern farming technique that could be a panacea for food insecurity and traditional agriculture's resource intensity and unsustainability (Bradley & Hernan Marulanda Tabares, 2000).

Figure 1. Basic diagram of an indoor hydroponic system

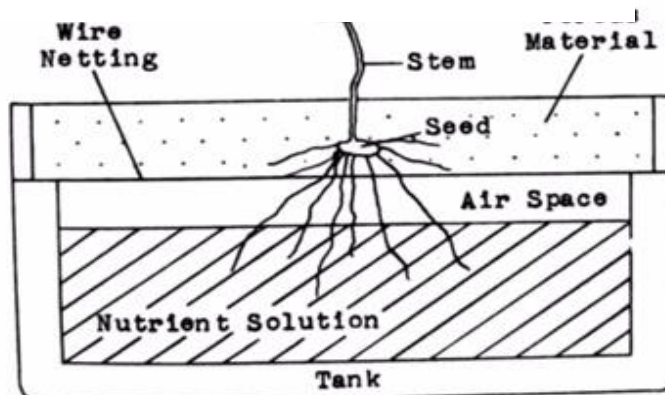


Fig 6 A typical water-culture (hydroponic) tank unit (after W. F. Gericke)

Source: Harris, 1966

In this a simple diagram of a hydroponic system. The plants are held by a platform that floats on the nutrient solution. An air pump is normally used to create oxygen that is supplied to the plants' roots.

⁴ It is important

ater
Innovations Technology that will be implemented by Mercy Corps. The project will focus on water-saving interventions to improve Syrian refugee resilience and support their Jordanian host communities; one such intervention will be a focus on the establishment and the expansion of hydroponic production systems.

In this regard, USAID's HGFI seeks to respond to the country's crippling water and energy scarcity, increase revenues and increase economic opportunity. In the USAID-funded greenhouse provided in Zarqa, Jordan, for example, 29,000 heads of lettuce can be produced using 216 m³ of water, compared to 1,160 m³ of water needed with conventional farming, reaching overall water savings of over 80 percent (USAID, 2017b). The project is also looking at the potential for linking these hydroponic farmers with large agribusinesses to gain risk assurance and new marketing channels. USAID has also acknowledged the need to focus on enabling marginalized groups by expressing its willingness to prioritize the training of women and the youth. The project will also connect farmers and households to financing streams for future hydroponic projects (ibid).

However, despite the environmental and economic virtues of hydroponic systems, the affordability and sustainability of a hydroponic system in a rural and development context is highly contentious (Baumgartner & Belevi, 2001; Dasso & Pinzas, 2000). There is a considerably large investment cost required for the hydroponic system even when installed in its most basic form. The system also demands a high level of technical expertise to manage the highly precise fertilizing regimen and monitor pH levels and electric conductivity (Baumgartner & Belevi, 2001; USAID & ECO Consult, 2015b). This is in complete contrast to conventional or traditional farming that requires no capital intensive materials or economic resources, and can be performed on any small homestead or field plot (Okemwa, 2015).

Also, the HGFI focused largely on medium- and large-scale private farmers, with no prior consideration of small-scale farmers' priorities or willingness to adopt modern technology. This is especially important in a rural setting, where the rates of uptake and retention of modern agricultural technology are notoriously slow; primarily due to low technical skills and socio-cultural stigma (Parvan, 2011). This top-down approach gives credence to the deliberate oversight of small-scale farmers' rights to self-determination and prosperity.

It is also important to note that the water used for irrigation in the Jordan Valley is primarily treated wastewater sourced from the King Talal Dam, which is of high salinity and not suitable for hydroponics (USAID & ECO Consult, 2016). Therefore, the cost of water increases significantly as it must go through additional filtration stages followed by a final water purification system. In the Highlands, while water derived from groundwater wells is of high quality and can be used directly for hydroponics (ibid.), most smallholder farmers do not have access to groundwater wells and must purchase treated water at a higher cost.

Hydroponics, therefore present two problems for the traditional smallholder farmers; first, there is a sizeable gap in expertise and education between a well-trained hydroponic engineer, and rural smallholder farmers who are arguably poorly educated and barely technologically proficient. Second, the high operation costs of the system will undoubtedly require long-term funding, rendering the financial sustainability of the project highly disputable (Savvas, 2003). Thus, due to its expensive setup and maintenance, the hydroponic systems have very low economic feasibility at a small-scale, making the technology one that is confined to large agribusinesses with the capital to afford it.

Another important aspect to consider is that while hydroponically grown vegetables are cost saving for farmers, they are considered high-quality crops that are destined for either exclusive local markets or for export. Hydroponic lettuce, for instance, can be sold at ten-times the market price of conventionally grown lettuce (USAID & ECO Consult, 2015). As such, these high-priced vegetables will assuredly be unaffordable for local communities, negating financial accessibility as an essential pillar for food security.

It could therefore be argued that the drive to infest the agricultural sector with hydroponic systems will only serve to aggravate the balance that is tipped in favor of large farmers, and at the expense of small and medium holder farmers. The technology creates a perpetual reliance on USAID, and this virtual eternal dependence on a development partner is antithetical to the empowerment precondition in a human rights-based approach, and completely undermines rural communities' sovereignty over their own resources.

USAID Palestine

USAID has also had a strong presence in Palestine; since 1994, \$5.4 billion have been invested in a range of programs from democracy and governance to education, water resources and infrastructure (USAID, 2017a). Compared to Jordan, the agency has a much more extensive agricultural project portfolio running in the Occupied Palestinian territories, primarily in the West Bank. USAID has invested heavily in a diverse number of agricultural fruits, vegetables and herbs; including carrots, dates, guava, avocado, potato, strawberry, mango, broccoli and sweet potato. USAID's involvement in the West Bank and Gaza has been centered on increasing exports by improving job skills, improving product quality, introducing new crops with high export potential, and by linking farmers with international agribusinesses and distributors (USAID, 2015).

These projects have resulted in an admittedly remarkable feat; according to USAID, their projects in 2012 and 2013 helped Palestinian agribusinesses increase the value of exports by \$25 million; this included a \$15 million increase in the export of fresh herbs and a \$1.7 million increase in Mejdoul date exports (USAID, 2013). The contracts that had been negotiated by USAID to link Palestinian farmers with both domestic and international agribusinesses led to the infusion of \$8 million into the Palestinian economy (ibid.)

Again, despite the economic merits of these export-oriented initiatives, USAID's interventions have been overwhelmingly concerned with producing cash crops for the external market. This is incredibly problematic under occupation, where the flow of Palestinian agricultural exports is dependent on Israeli's lengthy export procedures and often requires a fee to the Israeli government (Mansour, 2012; The World Bank, 2008a). So, while USAID projects bask in assisting Palestinian farmers to achieve an improved standard of living; they simultaneously force these very farmers to legitimize a colonial settler regime that strips them of their fundamental human rights. This also aggravates the subordination of the Palestinian economy to that of Israel's. This is complete negligence on the part of USAID that, as development cooperation, must contribute to the capacity of rights-holders to claim their rights, or of duty-bearers to meet their obligations.

This is also particularly dangerous in the context of Palestinian food insecurity. As of 2010, Palestine had a total export/import ratio of 1.1 compared to a world average of 11.3, indicating a frightening food import dependency (ESCWA, 2010). Considering the dwindling state of agricultural production and food security, this ratio has assumedly declined further. Furthermore, these imports are extremely precarious due to the high dependence on the Israeli market and the continued Israeli-imposed restrictions on the movement of goods, which frequently result in higher food prices (WFP, 2011; Ma'an Development Center, 2015; Palestinian Ministry of National Economy & ARIJ, 2011). Thus, where over 1.6 million people are food insecure (World Health Organization, 2017), only a strengthening of the domestic market would serve to improve the absolute level of sovereignty where Palestinians have true and complete jurisdiction over food resources (WFP & ARIJ, 2010).

Moreover, the projects have been criticized for working with large scale agricultural companies and farmers; aggravating a segregated system where these agribusinesses thrive and the small and medium sized farmers languish as sheer wage laborers for these businesses (Mansour, 2012). As such, these projects and contracts have contributed towards making a Palestinian plutonomy, provoking considerable imbalances where better off farm owners are given priority over vulnerable farmers.

Comparison of USAID strategies

The development partner USAID used different strategies in the two countries. In Jordan, it showed little interest in developing the agricultural sector and relied on modern technological solutions to enhance resource efficiency. In Palestine, it was comparatively more involved in the sector, albeit with a predominantly export-centered program. As discussed above, the two strategies have perhaps produced some benefits, be it economic or environmental. In both Palestine and Jordan, however, USAID took a market-based approach that strengthens the links between medium- and large-scale farmers and high-value domestic and export markets that do not warrant agricultural development, innovative research, or livelihood empowerment.

Evidently USAID focused on market failure and detached itself from the deep-rooted core of the agricultural plight that has lingered for decades in both Jordan and Palestine. For instance, the projects implemented in both countries make no attempt at addressing the neoliberal agenda that pushed for economic liberalization and reduced government intervention, favoring capital-intensive agribusinesses and foreign interests; consequently marginalizing small and medium scale farmers. USAID emphatically chose to allocate its resources on unsustainable solutions that do not call for comprehensive agricultural reform that empowers disenfranchised farmers and works towards alleviating the two countries from their donor and import dependence.

Additionally, neither project calls for the accountability of perpetrators in the agricultural industries from corrupt officials, to those complicit in land and water grabbing. By absolving these actors of their complicity, USAID does not contribute to push duty-bearers to meet their most basic obligations. Nor has USAID made any attempt at challenging the status quo of the Israeli occupation; unmistakably the largest threat to the socioeconomic and cultural prosperity of the Palestinian people and the Arab region at large.

The benefits from the USAID projects have not been sufficient to meet the standards of the crucial human rights-based approach; by focusing on producing food that is exclusive and out of reach by the masses, the projects have augmented the trade imbalances that have long cemented both countries in a state of import dependence. This is especially dangerous in a region that has become achingly well accustomed with the downfalls of international food price volatility and the precarious international food market. This is also in complete contradiction with the concept of food sovereignty that aspires towards a just food system where farmers and communities are free to define their own agricultural policies, away from institutional hegemony and vested political and economic interest (Patel, 2012).

Therefore, in its inability to provide the two countries with instruments to genuinely improve aspects of food security, food sovereignty and development, USAID has in effect shown no plausible interest in truly transforming the agricultural sectors, and has precluded itself from a human rights-based approach. Alternatively, this paper proposes five human rights-sensitive instruments that must be considered by development partners in the future:

- 1. Focus on local markets.** It is irrefutable that in both Jordan and Palestine, more support is needed to shorten the food supply chain and revitalize the local agricultural market. This strategy will allow small and medium farmers to compete fairly, ease the fiscal burdens of the current exhausting import-based food strategy, and will also have a number of socioeconomic and environmental knock-on effects.
- 2. Access to means of production.** Means of production, particularly a diverse variety of traditional seeds, are essential for promoting resilience, nutrition, and independence among smallholder farmers (McGuire, 2016; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2015). Thus, development partners should support local, farmer-driven, seed sector development to ensure that quality seeds are available and accessible. They should work with governments and stakeholders to regulate the seed sector in order to protect farmers from agribusiness monopolization and supremacy. Development partners must also ensure the provision of the other primary resources required for agricultural sustenance, including, but not limited to, land and water rights.
- 3. Boost farmers' unions.** In line with a rights-based approach that emphasizes the realization of rights, development partners should endorse and support the right of people to join a trade union. Also with regards to the rights-based approach that promotes empowerment and physical, intellectual and socioeconomic capacity building, farmers should be encouraged to establish a strong and united agricultural front in both Palestine and Jordan. This includes agricultural cooperatives and other farmer-led associations that will contribute towards the creation of a space for small and medium scale farmers to achieve long-term self-governance and self-determination. This collectivism of farmers will serve to ensure that their social and economic priorities are relayed within the national and regional political and economic arena.
- 4. Bolster intra-regional (MENA) agricultural trade and research cooperation.** Rather than adopt an export-based strategy with a seemingly chronic predilection for Western

markets, development partners should encourage and facilitate the creation of opportunities to boost suboptimal intra-regional agricultural trade (Hoekman, 2016). However, two caveats; first, this should be harmonious with rather than contradictory to proposition (1). Second, this should be a bottom-up approach that mobilizes community and trade union participation. Only this would offer a truly pro-poor instrument that catalyzes an equitable allocation of resources. As such, it is important for this to be linked to proposition number (3) to ensure the generation of long-term socioeconomic payoffs across the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, development partners should invest in both boosting innovative agricultural research and building on indigenous knowledge to look into new crop varieties (particularly staples such as wheat, barley, lentils, chickpeas, and fava bean), natural resource management, improving nutrition, and raising smallholder farmers' incomes. Considering most of the MENA countries are afflicted by the same agroecological challenges, development partners could support building a collaborative educational platform to promote the transfer of knowledge and expertise across the region.

5. **Dismantle the Israeli occupation.** No genuine agricultural development can take place with the capitulation of development partners to Israel as the occupying state. Development partners wishing to assist the Palestinian economy must play an active role in contributing towards helping the Palestinian people claim their rights by holding Israel accountable for its blatant and unabated infringement of international humanitarian law. It is important to note that this proposition is not limited to the rights of Palestinians, as the aforementioned resource theft committed by the Israeli state transcends borders and threatens the Jordanian agricultural sector.