

comparable rises in the prices of farm products.<sup>1</sup> The impact of declining profitability is especially pronounced in rainfed agriculture due to its intensive use of labour and the higher risks ensuing from excessive dependence on climatic factors.

The push-effect induced by reduced income from farming has been further accentuated by a soaring consumer price index and rising standards of living in rural communities. This has forced thousands of farmers to leave and choose the apparently more lucrative option of becoming hired labourers - largely in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

It is hard to ascertain with reasonable precision the influence of accelerated mechanization on the labour-absorptive capacity of West Bank agriculture. This is a field where much more work is needed. Tentatively the researcher believes that mechanization has not saved much on labour requirements, because of the extremely limited potential for modern labour saving machinery in the context of West Bank topography.

The repercussions of declining employment in agriculture are very grave, both economically and politically. Very briefly this process accelerated the desertion of land and its eventual transfer to Israeli control, undermined the productive potential of a major economic sector, and transformed a large segment of deeply rooted Palestinians into roaming "mercenaries". An important objective of this study is to seek ways which would help stop this drain, and possibly reverse it.

1. This issue will be scrutinized at length in the chapters on economics of production.

2. During 1970-73 the number of owner-operators has declined from 33,800 to 26,000, (West Bank Agriculture 1973, op cit, p 9). No more recent details are available.

A comparison of agricultural employment with other countries (see Table II-21) shows that the West Bank is lower in this regard than most countries of the Middle East, although still much higher than industrialized countries.

Table (II - 21)

Percent of labour force in agriculture in selected countries

	%		%
Egypt	50	Israel	7
Iraq	43	United States	2
Jordan	21	United Kingdom	2
Syria	32	West Bank	(22)

Source: World Development Report 1981, op cit, pp 70-71.

Composition of the agricultural labour force

Besides a marked decline in its aggregate size, the agricultural labour force has undergone several transformations in its composition. This study has identified the following trends:

1. The majority of farm workers are owner-operators. The ratio of hired labourers was reported in 1974 at 21%<sup>1</sup> and it appears to have dropped much further since then. Evidently, the proportion of owner-operators is considerably higher than paid labourers.
2. Women are estimated to provide around 75% of total agricultural labour supply (see section on female labour). Around two thirds of female farm labour is contributed by members of farm families, usually on a seasonal basis.
3. In addition to women, school children and old members of farm families provide important amounts of labour input. According to sampled farmers and technicians the share of this group amounts to 10-15% of all agricultural labour supply.

1. West Bank Agriculture 1974, op cit, p 8.