

CHAPTER VI

WEST BANK AGRICULTURE - AN OVERVIEW

Agriculture in under-developed countries is characterized by stereotyped socio-economic features which seem to vary only in magnitude. In most of these countries agriculture constitutes a major proportion of their domestic product, typically in the range of 30-40%, and provides employment for more than half of the active labour force. Although it was indicated in previous chapters that West Bank agriculture is not typical in either of these attributes, it nevertheless remains the most important sector for reasons bearing on the fundamental issues lying at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is evident that vigorous West Bank agriculture entails an extensive and deep attachment for absorbing an increasing number of repatriates when that is politically possible. Both of these points occupy a prominent position on the perceived list of strategic objectives for a national agricultural policy.

This chapter is intended to provide an overview of West Bank agriculture. As such it compliments chapters III and IV covering other aspects of resource conflict.

Agriculture as a source of food supply

The role of West Bank agriculture as a source of food supply for local communities is no less important than its role in international trade. As is typical in most peasant forms of agriculture, the bulk of farm produce is consumed by rural families themselves and nearby rural communities, leaving only surplus produce to be channelled into export trade. This is clearly exemplified by the

fact that only 21% of the estimated value of agricultural output for 1979 went into exports, and the rest was generated through local handling of produce.¹

The nutritional role of agriculture is undoubtedly substantial and it could be defined through two major parameters. First, it aims at restraining excessive dependence on Israel for food supply. According to available data (see Table VI-1) the West Bank relies heavily on imports (practically all from Israel) to meet the dietary needs of its resident population. In addition to its important economic implications, such a tight nutritional subordination of the West Bank entails serious political hazards by offering Israel additional leverage in its dealing with any forthcoming Palestinian authority.

Second, West Bank agriculture is not only expected to meet the demand for food by its current population, but it will also have to cope with the expected sharp rise in the demand for food should Palestinian refugees be permitted to come back home in the wake of a political settlement. As we shall see later in the section on objectives of agricultural development, this might cause a sharp rise in the demand for food, perhaps in the range of 50%.

Another question on the nutritional role of agriculture stems from the possibility of having certain forms of malnutrition. Although West Bankers do not seem to suffer from undernutrition, as could be inferred from Table (VI-2), some of them do face a

1. Computed from data on exports and agricultural income reported in the Statistical Abstract of Israel 1980, *op cit*, pages 685 and 701.