

Chapter 3: THE MAIN PROBLEMS FACED BY THE TARGET POPULATION IN WADI RAJIB CATCHMENT

In this chapter it is intended to summarize the problems faced and described by the local population of Wadi Rajib watershed area. The information is drawn from several sources:

- a socio-economic survey in Ajlun and Jerash Districts (Najat Aridi, June-September 1995)
- a gender specific target group analysis – Wadi Rajib (Elvira Ganter et al., September 1997)
- a study survey on the economic and social situation for a number of families in both Rajib and Sakhne (MoSD, 1993)
- a survey on some sociological aspects in Wadi Rajib (Azmi Ghneim, September 1997)

The problems listed below are not ranked according to the importance given to them by the local population but rather intend to reflect a general, yet complete picture of the situation.

A) The Drinking Water Problem

One widespread and severe problem which is not linked to any particular land use type is the lack of good quality drinking and household water. In many villages the piped village supply is insufficient to serve all families and at all times. The shortage of drinking water is particularly acute during the summer months.

Villagers have dug an increasing number of wells or cisterns in the past years in order to alleviate the water shortage. Many of the wells have fallen dry due to the falling groundwater table. Water harvesting systems with cisterns and other reservoirs to be filled from roof or surface runoff have therefore become increasingly popular.

Another problem mentioned by the target population is an increasing number of polluted springs and small watercourses serving for human consumption. Diseases originating from polluted drinking water pose frequent and serious health problems in particular for children.

B) Problems related to Agricultural Land Use

Despite the relatively high agricultural potential of the Wadi Rajib area and some unused plots, the local population complains about insufficient agricultural land area. This is mainly due to the very unequitable distribution of land resources among the landowners. The complaint has also to be seen in connection with the general wish to decrease the forest area in favor of enlarging the agricultural production area as was Jordanian Government policy in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The vast extent of mixed ownership tenure system (Masha'a) in the area is another reason for the stagnating agricultural production. Absenteeism of landlords and the unwillingness to invest in joint ownership plots has contributed to their underutilisation.

The majority of the local population are part time or pensioner farmers. Their production is primarily oriented towards their household needs and this type of farmer is hardly willing to change or invest in new production methods. As a consequence, there is little diversity in the agricultural land use and an entrepreneurial spirit is barely existent. High cost of inputs and labour requirements, fragmentation of plots, difficulties in decision making on "Masha'a" land, insecurities over usufruct rights to rented and sharecropped land are all factors limiting the motivation for long term investment and sustainable use of resources.

The widespread plantations of olives and other fruit trees in WR constitute an ecologically sound land use system, which is perfectly adapted to the local conditions and socio-economically profitable. Nevertheless, the present olive and fruit production is considered too low and could be greatly enhanced by a better choice of varieties, correct pruning techniques and improved water management. Fertilisation and undercropping of legumes could increase overall production.

The great potential for irrigated agriculture, particularly in the lower parts of WR, is not sufficiently made use of. The main problems in this area circulate around the land tenure and water management issues. Most of the irrigated plots are owned by absent landlords and therefore exploited under various sharecropping and rental schemes. Those cultivating the land do not feel responsible for the maintenance of the irrigation scheme, but aim at drawing the greatest possible short-term profit from their work. Among the absent landowners there is no common understanding or collective cooperation in order to jointly manage the existing structures. This is the main reason why large parts of the irrigation scheme have fallen into disrepair and why an increasing number of formally irrigated plots are now fallowed.

Agricultural extension services are virtually inexistent. There are no agricultural extension officers available in the area, but farmers can ask for support and advice in the Agricultural Directorate of Ajlun. This has led to very limited interaction between the local Government services and the average smallhold farmer. Farmers complain frequently about the low quality of varieties of olive and fruit trees provided by the state and the unavailability of improved seed varieties for most annual crops.

In recent years the Jordanian Government has cut subsidies for agricultural inputs such as animal feed, fertilizer and certain crops. Also some of the prices paid for agricultural produce in the local markets have decreased. Market prices according to supply and demand have discouraged the producers. Farmers therefore often demand better protection and reinstatement of the subsidies.

C) Problems related to Livestock Production and Rangelands

In the eastern and the central part of the Wadi Rajib watershed there is hardly any open rangeland available. Either the land is used for private olive and fruit orchards or is under forest cover. Livestock owners therefore do not have much space for grazing their animals. They heavily depend on the forest areas for grazing and browsing their sheep and goats, which is considered illegal, but this prohibition is not widely enforced. Many owners of smaller flocks practice a part-time stall feeding system under which branches of trees and shrubs are cut in the forest areas near by, fed to the animals at home and the woody parts are then dried and used for firewood.

Livestock production in WR is generally of low productivity. Milk and eggs are used for home consumption. Live animal sale is rare and only provides limited income opportunities. With improvement of breeds, more fodder production and semi-

intensive management systems a marked increase in livestock production could be achieved.

D) Problems related to Forest Land

Local farmers frequently complain about their insufficient benefits from forest trees. Getting cutting permits for forest trees on private lands is difficult and takes a long time and highly bureaucratic procedures. Many people therefore opt to use the forest areas illegally. Forest guards and their fining system cannot prevent this, especially as most of the guards are inhabitants from the neighbouring villages. Forest resources remain highly threatened by illegal cuttings, destructive grazing, fires and encroachment.

The relationship between forestry institutions and local villages are strained. Forest management is associated with a "hide and seek" game between the authorities and the users. The forestry legislation is of the older, traditional type i.e. restrictive and repressive. While focussing mainly on prohibitions, limitations and sanctions, it practically ignores planning, management and development issues.

E) Social Problems

The lack of employment opportunities and insufficient household income are often mentioned as the biggest problems by the local population. Many families are permanently indebted with other extended family members or Government institutions. Household surveys have revealed that many families are constantly overspending.

Landlessness and unequal distribution of land resources severely restrict the options for increased income from agricultural activities.

A lack of collective cooperation between the villagers, whether in producing, or in marketing agricultural products has been observed. The principles of economic individualism are firmly enrooted in the local society, despite the fact that WR has less tribal differences than many other areas in Jordan. Hence the idea of a community based planning approach is alien to villagers and agricultural staff alike.

Government services have in the past hardly interacted with local farmers. They generally regard farmers as poor and uneducated. Therefore, Government projects have focussed on providing subsidies and free hand-outs and do not demand active participation of beneficiaries. Most community members have thus become passive recipients of aid programmes and generally expect others to find solutions to their pressing problems.

In spite of migration to urban areas, high population increase rates still result in land fragmentation of agricultural plots and continuous pressure on forest lands and natural resources. Birth spacing programmes have shown little impact due to the prevailing traditions and beliefs.

From all the above-mentioned problems it can be concluded that a project dealing with natural resources management in WR would have to focus on the development of economically attractive, socially acceptable and environmentally sound, land and natural resources management systems which requires significant changes in the attitudes of the Government agencies as well as rural populations towards a more participatory and integrated approach in planning and implementation of programs and activities. Also a community forestry approach would be badly needed.