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Contents

- 4 HELMUT KRIEGER
Nurturing Alternative Development:
Agricultural Cooperatives in Palestine
- 14 PHILIPP SALZMANN
A Food Regime's Perspective on Palestine: Neoliberalism and the
Question of Land and Food Sovereignty within the Context of
Occupation
- 35 AYMAN ABDULMAJEED
Conceptual and Methodological Approaches to Reading the Realm
of Cooperatives in Occupied Palestine
- 62 EILEEN KUTTAB
Alternative Development: A Response to Neo-Liberal
De-Development from a Gender Perspective

Essay and Interview

- 91 NUR ARAFEH
'Resistance Economy': A New Buzzword?
- 103 HIBA AL-JIBEIHI
'Protecting our lands and supporting our farmers'
(Interview with Philipp Salzmänn)

- 112 Editors and Authors of the Special Issue
116 Publication Details



Said Zawahari, 74. Palestinian Shepherd outside his home and small farm, overshadowed by the vast Jewish settlement of Har Homa, in the Palestinian West Bank.
Photographer: Zed Nelson, from the series 'In This Land' (2012)

HELMUT KRIEGER

**Nurturing Alternative Development:
Agricultural Cooperatives in Palestine¹**

While the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt)² have been in receipt of among the highest levels of development aid per capita worldwide since the implementation of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s (Krieger 2015: 130–141), the socio-economic situation on the ground has severely deteriorated over the last decade. This is clearly reflected in labour market data, poverty indicators, and widespread food insecurity, not to mention the personal insecurity for Palestinians caused by the Israeli occupation regime (Al-Botmeh 2010; Hilal/Al Kafri/Kuttab 2008; Krieger 2015; OCHAoPt 2016; WFP et al 2013). Although food insecurity and dependence on emergency programmes provided by international donors have reached an unprecedented level in Gaza since the most recent war in the region (OCHAoPt 2016), widespread food insecurity has been evident both in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip since the beginning of this century (UNCTAD 2015: 10; WFP et al. 2013: 22–34).

Established and enforced by international finance institutions such as the World Bank, the dominant development model in Palestine has been repeating the mantra of economic growth in its neoliberal version over the last 25 years without effectively supporting the necessary political precondition for that – an independent Palestinian state within the borders of 1967. This fundamental contradiction is deeply linked to the ongoing Israeli regime of domination in Palestine and has led to what Mushtaq Khan describes as “asymmetric containment” (Khan 2004: 49), a strategic exclusion of the oPt that is supplemented by inclusive components such as a restricted number of work permits for Palestinian workers to enter the Israel labour market. Furthermore, the occupation regime and its various mechanisms of control, repression, exclusion, and dispos-

session (Hever 2010) can only effectively enforce its power when the Palestinian Authority (PA) acts as a subordinated partner. This double-bind of contemporary power structures, entailing a power nexus of colonial occupation and neoliberal development supplemented by a local authority, constitutes a basic political, social and economic condition in Palestine (Krieger 2015: 123-235).

Such basic conditions have led to a multiple (developmental) crisis in the oPt that, in turn, has lent urgency to the exploration of alternatives to the *status quo*. It thus comes as no surprise that the power nexus of colonialism and neoliberalism in the oPt has increasingly been the subject of a fundamental critique over the last 15 years (Hammami 2006; Hanafi/ Tabar 2005; Hanieh 2013; Jad 2008; Krieger 2015; Kuttab 2006; Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung/Center for Development Studies 2015). In this context, more and more critical arguments for alternative development and “resistance economies” (Kuttab 2006: 233) have begun to re-emerge. In these debates, a strong critique of neoliberal models of economic growth promoted by international donors is linked with an understanding of development as a means of realising inalienable rights to freedom(s) and self-determination. Recognising the asymmetry of power and the ongoing Israeli domination of Palestine, such a rights-based approach calls for a radical re-democratisation of the development process, in which economic independence and self-reliance constitute necessary dimensions of an ongoing political and national struggle (Dana 2014; Kuttab 2006, 2010; Tabar 2015). From this perspective, (agricultural) cooperatives in particular hold the key to developing a sustainable, collective, resistant and self-reliant mode of production. They therefore would represent an essential component of alternative development in Palestine.

At the same time, such a perspective is challenged by different approaches, amongst which I would like to highlight the following: a class-based approach in which peasants’ overall political significance for an ongoing struggle in Palestine is questioned (El Zein 2017), and a mainstream academic approach based on the assumption that agricultural cooperatives in the oPt have limited significance due to their “lack of vision, resources, leadership and unsuccessful business plans” (ILO 2014: 6).

1. Agricultural cooperatives: Challenging colonial power?

There are about 240 agricultural cooperatives operating in different agricultural sectors in the West Bank and 20 in the Gaza Strip, out of a total of nearly one thousand cooperatives in Palestine that are formally registered at the General Directorate for Cooperatives at the Palestinian Ministry of Labour (ILO 2014: 3). In general, agricultural labour accounted for about 12 per cent of the total formal employment in the oPt in 2012 (UNCTAD 2015: 11). The contribution of the agricultural sector to the gross domestic product (GDP) declined from about 19 per cent in 1987 to less than six per cent in 2011. Prior to 1967, agriculture constituted more than half of the Palestinian GDP (ibid.: 9).

This decline is one of the starting points of Rayya El Zein's critique of the political assumption in resistance economy literature of the significance of Palestinian peasantry in an ongoing struggle for independence (El Zein 2017). By critically examining such concepts, published predominantly by Palestinian scholars (Dana 2014), she argues that their focus on the self-reliant production of agricultural collectives leaves much of the potential of the concept unexploited and tends to romanticise the Palestinian farmer as a national signifier (ibid.: 21-23). Based on the importance of the working class for the struggle, she views "Palestinian labor, investment, and bureaucracy as one interdependent nexus" (ibid.: 22) that should be systematically included in ideas of resistance economy. From her perspective, this should be done by re-conceptualising the importance both the PA and a so-called progressive wing of the national bourgeoisie have in establishing an economy that creates the basic prerequisite for independence (and creates a gradual coherence of the fragmented working class as well).

It is clear that the sheer volume of the agricultural labour force and its steady decline in Palestine doesn't allow one to strictly focus on it alone when discussing the political consequences of the different social classes of Palestinian society. Furthermore, and from my point of view, by understanding the issue of economic self-reliance as an ambivalent approach during an anti-colonial struggle, agricultural cooperatives could be marked as a central reference point directed against the colonial power's strategy of dispossession, but cannot be a focal point of an overall political-economy strategy that is determined to fundamentally challenge the

power nexus of colonialism and neoliberalism. Hence, de-centering cooperatives' economic significance doesn't entail de-centering their political importance at the same time. By privileging an economic development led by capital and bureaucracy, as El Zein argues, the political significance of cooperatives would be severely undermined and the destructive role the PA already plays would be neglected. From my point of view, this would only deepen the multiple crises in Palestine.

Another argument that challenges the significance agricultural cooperatives have, follows a more mainstream approach: according to a study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2013, only seven per cent of a total of 230 agricultural cooperatives in the West Bank have clearly articulated organisational structures, strategic objectives and goals, whereas more than 85 per cent face "poor performance due to lack of vision, resources, leadership and unsuccessful business plans. This resulted in a loss of momentum and motivation towards self-help." (ILO 2014: 6) Furthermore, for 25 per cent of the cooperatives, registration as a cooperative mainly served the goal of gaining humanitarian assistance and subsidies and not of building a collective production unit (*ibid.*). As a consequence, agricultural cooperatives would not be able to exploit an economy of scale, and their relatively low level of capitalisation would severely hamper growth, as the ILO states (*ibid.*: 7). It concludes in its study that in order to minimise the problems agricultural cooperatives face, the PA and its political responsibility has to be reinstated. By recommending that the Palestinian Authority should provide technical as well as administrative assistance to agricultural cooperatives, ILO makes it clear that the PA is the main body responsible for supporting and stabilising cooperatives (*ibid.*: 9-10).

These findings and recommendations constitute a rather general assessment that can be read in many publications on agricultural cooperatives in the West Bank; they thus reflect a quite common understanding of what the problems are and how they can be minimised/solved. ILO, as well as many other authors publishing studies on agricultural cooperatives, follow an allegedly pragmatic approach by not systematically including and fundamentally questioning the current power relations in Palestine. Hence, ILO's research results come as no surprise at all. Given the overall political and economic conditions significantly shaped by the Oslo parameters and already set up 25 years ago, it is, on the contrary,

a quite remarkable finding that there are still seven per cent of all agricultural cooperatives obviously operating in an efficient and productive way. The same applies for those 25 per cent of all cooperatives whose main goal seems to generate subsidies by international donors. After having reinvented a concept of rural development in Palestine some years ago, international donors' efforts to financially support rural communities in Areas B and C have paved the way for some Palestinian villagers to clearly hope that they will be given a slice of the pie by establishing some sort of agricultural cooperative. This is not surprising at all. At a time of being reduced to an object of displacement and dispossession by the occupation regime and simultaneously being aware of multi-billion budget support programmes for the PA (Krieger 2015: 142-152), it is nevertheless a remarkably low number of such cooperatives that rural communities have created as a way of inventing coping strategies. The same goes for the vast majority of agricultural cooperatives in the West Bank that, according to ILO's findings, lack basic management and do not offer adequate services to their members. How can they develop such activities at all when they are simultaneously being confronted with a power nexus of colonialism and neoliberalism? And how can main recommendations in these studies be based on the assumption that the PA can and should support agricultural cooperatives, given the fact that its economic policy focuses on strengthening industrial agricultural enterprises and, in general, a market-led economic model under the guidance of international donors?

Only if research on agricultural cooperatives systematically includes the power nexus of colonial occupation and neoliberal development supplemented by a local authority as a basic condition of all economic and political dimensions in the oPt, will one be able to analyse the limitations as well as potentials cooperatives currently have, in a more adequate way. At the same time, this basic condition must be understood as a necessary but not sufficient explanation of the contradictions agricultural cooperatives face in establishing production units (and community centres as well).

This is exactly the starting point of the contributions gathered in this special issue. Following up on a study of agricultural cooperatives we conducted in 2015 and 2016³, the aim of this issue is to take a close look at how cooperatives can enrich, substantiate and reformulate alternative concepts of development in Palestine.

2. Contributions: Linking academic and activist perspectives

Philipp Salzmänn discusses initiatives in the agricultural sector against the background of enforced control over natural resources by the Israeli occupation regime. Applying a food regime perspective, he explores the neoliberal restructuring of Palestine and its fatal consequences, including the marginalisation of rural Palestinian communities and depeasantisation. The food regime in the oPt is resisted by an international food sovereignty movement, locally represented by the Palestinian Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), the first member of La Via Campesina from the Arab world. Salzmänn points out that La Via Campesina strengthens the position of Palestinian farmers by investigating Israeli violations and supporting them in their rights to access land for cultivation. He argues that the food sovereignty concept promoted by La Via Campesina provides local organisations with a powerful “anti-systemic political concept fundamentally questioning existing power and dominance relations”.

The two following contributions in this issue tie their understanding of alternative concepts of development even closer to local experiences of grassroots organisations and cooperatives. Ayman AbdulMajeed draws upon a participatory dialogue with cooperatives from Al-Aqaba, Toubas, and Tamoun to reflect on the methodological foundations of development research on Palestinian cooperatives. Confronting Western developmental perspectives with discourses of resistance against colonial domination, AbdulMajeed discusses the possibilities for a new development framework that is closely connected to cooperatives’ experiences. In his article he suggests that the cooperatives’ experiences can contribute significantly to the conceptualisation of developmental alternatives, shifting the focus from neoliberal economic policies to acts of resistance and change. These developmental alternatives are not least meant to challenge capitalist modes of consumption and individualism.

Eileen Kuttāb subsequently continues with her discussion of women’s cooperatives in the 1970s and 1980s, two decades which she characterises as a time when the national struggle for independence was at its peak. In development studies, she argues, women’s initiatives in Palestine have been hardly recognised. Women’s management role in local cooperatives

has been falsely interpreted as a simple extension of their household roles. In stark contrast to this interpretation, Kuttab argues that the work of women's cooperatives formed a resistant response to Israeli occupation as well as to global developmental agendas. By delinking their production from the market economy and resisting the occupation economy, women's cooperatives created an alternative vision for development, as the author argues. Kuttab suggests that present-day initiatives can learn from the experience of women's initiatives in the pre-Oslo period. They could provide the 'guidelines' for a resistant economy in which the reconfiguration of social relations through modes of production is linked to a reconfiguration of gender relations.

More recent political and scientific attempts to re-envision 'development' as 'resistance' and to promote a model of 'resistance economy' are discussed in Nur Arafeh's review essay. The author critically examines how ideas about 'resistance economy' relate to a broader and long-standing discussion about 'alternative development' in Palestine. Arafeh's review essay draws upon a wide and diverse range of literature, including Arabic sources rarely available to Western researchers.

The special issue closes with an interview conducted in 2017 by Philipp Salzmänn, who spoke to Hiba Al-Jibeihi, International Advocacy Coordinator of the UAWC in Palestine. The UAWC is the largest agricultural development institution in Palestine and has contributed to the establishment of 81 cooperatives and 20,000 small family projects in the oPt. Taking an outlook on future requirements for a self-determined food system in Palestine, Hiba Al-Jibeihi calls upon the international community to hold the Israeli government accountable to the violation of international law and to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS).

This special issue collects contributions by authors whose basic perspective is to critically analyse (current) developments in Palestine in order to be able to outline some ideas for the future. Whether these reflections can be productively used and further developed, doesn't depend solely on an academic debate. In this sense, the linkage between academic research and social initiatives provided in this volume can also be understood as a necessary way of crossing the boundaries of academic realms.

- 1 Research for this special issue has been carried out by the University of Vienna's Department of Development Studies and the Center for Development Studies at Birzeit University under the project *Palestinizing Development* (project P210), funded by the Austrian Commission for Development Research at the OeAD-GmbH (KEF). Our research project aimed at deepening and articulating an alternative vision for development in the Palestinian context by researching on agricultural co-operatives. As the project coordinator, I would like to thank KEF very warmly for its generous support and funding without which our research project as well as the present publication would have been impossible.
- 2 In accordance with international law and, among others, UN organisations, I use the term 'occupied Palestinian territory' or 'Palestine' to refer to the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.
- 3 See footnote 1.

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