

## Current Status and Prospective of Farmers' Unions and Syndicates in Egypt

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In Egypt, farming has traditionally been a private business managed by families for centuries. However, due to the weak organizational structure in rural areas, in Egypt, farmers are used to work in an environment that is organized and shaped by external decisions. Even in the modern history of Egypt, the first initiative to establish farmers' organizations originated outside the farmers' community by the well-known social reformer, Omar Lotfi in 1908. He studied in Italy and his experiences there proved to be beneficial. When he returned, he proposed a cooperative type of organization aiming at empowering small farmers with less than 5 feddans.

This was a way to struggle against the deteriorating economic conditions prevailing since 1903. During this crisis, many farmers had lost their lands to the benefit of the banks in exchange of their debts (often due to unfair interest rates). However, the first agricultural cooperative established in 1910 was formed as a farmers' cooperative syndicate under the commercial law due to the lack of any other relevant legislative framework.

Despite the fact that the cooperative movement was initiated as a voluntary movement, its real contribution to agricultural development in Egypt took place after the revolution of 1952 when it played the role of a parastatal organization. During the revolution, the Agrarian Reform proposed in 1945 was enacted by Nasser's regime in September 1952 and amended in 1954. Consequently, around 150 000 landless households became owners of small farms (5 *feddans* each). Cooperatives were very suitable organizations to support these new small farmers both economically and socially. They also helped developing and maintaining the lands' productive capacity and empower these new small farmers for the sake of the national economic stability.

Yet, these organizations required the direct supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Agrarian Reform. Meanwhile, the interest of the state supported the development of the cooperative leaders' skills and their aspirations. Paradoxically, the leaders continued to work under strict centralized administration where their role was marginalized. This led to rising tension between the leaders and officials, which erupted during the first national meeting of the agricultural cooperative in July 1976. Henceforth, the situation deteriorated. The executive authorities smashed the agricultural cooperative movement through several bureaucratic and security means. This was a response to the endeavor adopted by the cooperative leaders to have an independent position vis-à-vis the agricultural policies.

The tension between the state authorities and the cooperative movement emerged during the struggle against the top-down and centralized approach. It continued until the liberalization of the economy and the launch of the Structural Adjustment Program in the late 1980s. With the first national rural development program of *Shorouk* ("Sunrise") in 1994 and the establishment of the first Ministry for Rural Development (MRD) in 1997, there was a tendency to rely more on NGOs rather than on cooperatives. Unfortunately, despite the context of liberalization, this initiative failed to continue and the *Shorouk* programme ended in 2004 instead of in 2017, as was planned. The ruling party leaders invested their political interest elsewhere and sponsored an alternative project.

Under liberalization arrangements, several forms of NGOs were established, both local ones or branches of international NGOs supported by foreign aids such as CARE International and Oxfam. They contributed to the development of the farming community but with a different approach from that of the cooperatives. Moreover, until the revolution of 2011, the authorities prohibited the forming of Unions and Syndicates in the agricultural sector as they feared anti-government collective actions.

The revolution of January 2011 has given the population and farmers in particular, the opportunity to regain their own organizational tools. It has enabled them to express their concerns and hopes by establishing their own independent syndicates and unions. In March 2011, the Minister of Labour Forces eliminated the official banning of unions. Moreover, the Minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation supported some leader farmers to coordinate their efforts by establishing civil society organizations. The motives of the founders and the objectives of these organizations still need to be deeply analysed to check whether Egyptian farmers will be really able to take decisions and shape their own future.

### The profile of farmers in Egypt

In Egypt, 57.4% of the entire population lives in rural areas. On the one hand, the "old" rural communities of traditional farmers are settled in villages and on the other hand "new" rural communities live in new recently built settlements. The "old" rural communities were established several centuries or millennia ago and extend across the Nile Valley, the Delta and its borders. The "new" rural communities emerged just a few decades ago and extend across reclaimed areas whether in the desert or the areas of dried lakes all over the country. The social structure and social life of these new rural communities differ drastically from those of the traditional farmers since this depends on the population characteristics and origin.

Concerning the land tenure system, there is also a difference between the old and the newly reclaimed lands. Today, in Egypt, the cultivated areas reach 8.6 million *feddans*. The newly reclaimed lands represent more than a third of these agricultural areas. Only 7.07 million *feddans* are registered and the majority of unregistered lands are located in the newly reclaimed lands. In the old cultivated lands, the average farm size tends to be far less than that of the newly reclaimed lands.

#### **Distribution of cultivated lands by farm size and holders in 2010**

Calculated from the data presented in table (19-5)  
of the *Egypt Statistical Year Book 2013, CAPMAS*

Farm size (feddan)*	Area		Holdings		Average (feddan)*
	Feddan*	%	Holders	%	
Less than 1	1048328	14.83	2500419	56.74	0.42
1-	1486034	21.03	1045432	23.73	1.42
3-	1152570	16.31	466434	10.59	2.47
5-	747089	10.57	167065	3.79	4.47
10+	2633481	37.26	227024	5.15	11.60
Total	7067502	100	4406374	100	1.604

\*1 feddan= 4200 m<sup>2</sup>

The majority of agricultural land holders (2.5 millions) who represent 56.7% of all holders (4.4 millions) have tiny farms of less than one *feddan* and what they hold only represents 14.8% of all the registered cultivated area. Even those who have farms of between 1 and less than 3 *feddans* represent 23.7% of all holders with 21.0% of the total registered cultivated land. These two categories of around 3.5 million (80.4%) represent small farmers in Egypt who deserve support and protection of their rights through the farmers' organizations such as syndicates and unions. Landless agricultural labourers and small holders of unregistered lands are also part of the farming community that reached around 6.4 million people (72.6% males and 27.4% females) working in agriculture by the end of 2012 (CAPMAS, 2013).

On the other hand, big landlords who hold 50 *feddans* of agricultural land and more are mostly connected with international market as exporters. They established their own unions and NGOs that protect their rights since a long time. Subsidies to the exporters of agricultural products, especially horticulture were maintained all the time while subsidies to small farmers diminished since long time ago.

### Historical background of the emergence of farmers syndicates in Egypt

The Union of Egyptian Peasants entitled *AlFalahin AlMasrieen Union* was the first union established by some leader farmers. According to its website ([www.fallaheen.org](http://www.fallaheen.org)), the establishment of the union by 320 farmers from 15 Egyptian governorates was announced on 30 April 1983. Some popular leaders of the left-wing party, the "National Progressive Unionist" (*AlTagammu*) led this initiative. The union could not obtain a legal status at that time due to the official prohibition of independent unions or syndicates outside the single General Union of Labour that had obtained official recognition before 2011. This was the reason why Egypt was blacklisted by the ILO for depriving labour forces from their freedom of association. In March 2011, the Minister of Labour Forces freed Egypt from the ILO embargo by allowing all labour forces, including farmers, to establish independent civil society organizations.

On 30 April 2011, the union was therefore officially recognized by the decree no. 1332/2 as the *AlFalahin AlMasrieen Union* and its branch syndicates. The Union's organizational structure includes three components, i.e. the general assembly of all members, the local assemblies, and the board (the executive body) of the union. The general assembly includes all members of the local assemblies' leading committees. It is the supreme authority of the Union and meets once every five years. The board comprises all elected chairpersons of the local assemblies and runs the Union's activities between the two consecutive general assembly meetings. The board has nine technical committees. The local assembly is the basic unit of the union that comprises all members at governorate, district or village level. Its chairperson is selected and a leading committee meets on a monthly basis and runs the activities at that level.

Three other farmers' syndicates and unions were formed in Egypt after the revolution of 2011:

1. The *Union of Egyptian Small Farmers' Syndicates* was established after the revolution, on the 28 July 2011 under the record no. 2/1234. 15 branches of small farmers' syndicates from 15 governorates formed the union. These branch syndicates include 8 from Upper Egypt and 7 from Lower Egypt. Later on, a syndicate representing the Suez Canal and Sinai region was also formed. This Union was initiated thanks to the support of *Al Ard* ("The Earth") civil rights organization and from beneficiaries of the Young Graduate projects settled in the newly reclaimed lands. All members are small farmers with land holdings of 5 *feddans* (around 2.1 hectares) or less. Although this is an organization that should be very active for the enhancement of the farmers' livelihood but it does not play the required role due to its weak socio-economic and organizational status. During the early contacts with the Center for Rural Development Researches and Studies at the Faculty of Agriculture based in Cairo University (CRDRS), the organization showed eager interest in capacity building.

**Summary of Current Farmers' Professional Organizations**

Source: CRDRS exploratory survey, 2012

Farmers Organization	Established (Year)	Political Affiliation (Support)	Geographical Coverage (Governorates)
<i>AlFalihin AlMasrieen Union</i>	1983 then 2011	Left wing party	16
<i>Falahin General Syndicate</i>	2011	Middle Conservative	27
<i>Union of Egyptian Small Farmers' Syndicates</i>	2011	Civil Rights	16
<i>Falahy Misr Union</i>	2011	Right Conservative	21
<i>Other sporadic syndicates</i>	2011-2012	n.a.	n.a.

2. The *Falahin General Syndicate* is the first farmers' syndicate established on the 11 April 2011, after the January revolution under the record no. 466/2 (<http://egyptianfarmers.com/>). Many of the leaders of its branch syndicates at governorate level had previous experience in politics through their involvement in local political affairs was prior to 2011. Thus, they capitalized on their past experience and social ties in rapidly leading the newly emerged farming professional organization in all the governorates. They are the first group that is supported by the officials of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation (MALR). In this regard, the syndicate started networking with state officials and also the private sector with the aim of dealing with problems related to the agricultural production sector such as the provision of fertilizers and the distribution of reclaimed lands to landless farmers ([www.facebook.com/NAKABET.ELFLA7EN](http://www.facebook.com/NAKABET.ELFLA7EN)).

3. The *Falahy Misr Syndicate* was established on the 5 August 2011 under record no. 667/2 ([www.facebook.com/pages/فلاحي-نقابة-مصر/167743743312294](http://www.facebook.com/pages/فلاحي-نقابة-مصر/167743743312294)). The establishment of this Syndicate was led by some popular leaders of the conservative party *Freedom and Justice* which is based on the Muslim Brothers movement. It has branch syndicates in 21 governorates and announced the goal of reaching an amount of 100 thousand members in April 2013. Most of the syndicate's leaders come from various professional backgrounds but they are all involved in medium and small farming enterprises. They also showed interest in capacity building during the early contacts with CRDRS.

There are several other individual initiatives to form farmers unions but they are not registered yet.

**The Vision and mandate of the existing farmers' Unions and Syndicates**

In general, all farmers' syndicates and unions adopt standard statutes set by the administrative authority. Usually, the main goals of the organizations are set around the following specific goals:

- Providing agricultural inputs and services to the members (fertilizers, seeds, etc.);
- Resolving economic problems, including marketing of agricultural production;
- Developing rural Egypt and providing social services to marginalized categories;
- Resolving agricultural land tenure problems and rethinking the tenancy law;
- Reshaping accessibility measures to resources especially land resources;
- Providing pension and health insurance to farmers;
- Protecting farmers against the monopoly of agricultural inputs and services;
- Enhancing agricultural extension activities and services;
- Introducing the principles of clean farming;
- Providing a Monitoring and Evaluation system of other agricultural associations.

In this regard, it worth mentioning that in light of the vision of these organizations two heads from the four major syndicates were selected to represent farmers in the constitutional assembly that was in charge of the formulation of the constitution of 2012. Despite the shortcoming and flaws of this constitution, for the first time, it included some items that confirm the right of farmers and rural areas in development. This was an indirect result of the technical and scientific support provided by the CRDRS to the leaders of these syndicates.



CRDRS First Capacity Building Workshop  
for the leaders of agricultural syndicates in March 2012

### Governance and other challenges

As mentioned in the *Falahin General Syndicate's* structure, some syndicates claim their organisational system was set so as to ensure transparency in the elections of the governing boards. The principal system regulates the syndicate's organization from bottom to top. Each group of farmers and breeders in a specific geographical or administrative area has the right to establish a branch syndicate or local assembly at this administrative level. The General Syndicate or Union is formed from all these branch syndicates or local assemblies. The principal system (platform) also includes a number of regulatory measures taking membership requirements, duties, rights and penalties into account.

An exploratory survey (Nawar, 2012) reviewed finance as a determining factor in the governance of these syndicates and unions. The survey revealed that these organizations are basically financed thanks to the membership fees and annual or monthly subscriptions. Fees for the provision of services such as the delivery of professional status certificates required for IDs, is another main source of funding. Some FUs accept grants and state support. Foreign aid is restricted and has to be approved by the regulatory state authority.

Syndicates face both internal and external challenges including the following:

- The traditional cautious attitude of state authorities towards collective actions from local groups especially those of marginalized communities.
- The lack of financial and physical resources required to invest in the activities needed to achieve their goals.

- Farmers in general are not well equipped with the managerial skills and practical experience such as the participatory/democratic approach required to run civil society organizations efficiently and effectively. They need intensive capacity building efforts to provide them with such skills and experience.
- The lack of proper understanding of the functioning potential of farmers' syndicates and the different role they play from other community-based organizations such as agricultural cooperatives. Nowadays, there are severe conflicts between some leaders of the farmers' syndicates and the cooperative union leadership over the legitimacy of each other to represent the interests of farmers. Furthermore, some syndicates claim that they have the right to run economic enterprises similar to the ones run by cooperatives and to control their activities.
- Due to the law 12 of 1995, on the basis of which these syndicates and unions had been established, there is more than one group of these syndicates. One group claims that it is the only legitimate organization to represent the farmers' interests and that the other groups should merge within it. This is another source of tension among newly emerged farmers' organizations. This law was revised in August 2013 and the eventual changes may affect the legislative statuses of all the above-mentioned organizations.

### Interrelationships within the farmers' unions and syndicates and with other local organizations

As mentioned here above, there are more than 80 farmers' syndicate and unions spread across the 28 governorates. This leads to a situation where we can find more than one farmers' syndicate at the same administrative level belonging to the different groups. This situation has led to competition and tension among these organizations. Coordination and intensive mediation are required.

Meanwhile, due to some syndicate leaders' misconception of the potential functions of their organizations, they launched a debate over the legitimacy of representing the interests of farmers against other organizations such as agricultural cooperatives. This debate erupts each time that some economic activity is delegated to a agricultural cooperative which is an economic organization running its activities on social bases.

Differentiation and integration as basic organizational processes among these different types of organizations (Nelson, and Quick, 2002) should be considered and applied. As a means to smoothen these tensions, capacity building is crucial and the CRDRS has been quite active in this regards.

### Regional perspectives

Only the *AlFalihin AlMasrieen Union* showed early interest in similar regional activities. It has established strong ties with some regional Arab and African Farmers' Unions as some of its leaders worked with these regional organizations. Other syndicates have also tried to establish connections at regional level.

However, in an exploratory survey of the status of syndicates undertaken by the CRDRS (Nawar, 2012) the surveyed syndicates expressed their interest to establish relationships with similar regional organizations. As the national partner of the A2DTRM project financed by AFD, the CRDRS organized some seminars for the exchange of experiences with similar organizations based in France, Morocco and Tunis in 2011 and in 2012. These seminars were aimed at highlighting the importance of regional cooperation.

### Conclusion

A significant number of farmers' syndicates and unions were established by farmers who benefited from the distribution of reclaimed desert lands in the framework of the Young Graduates' Project. This was reflected in the dual nature of the structure and interests of newly emerged farmers' organizations.

Furthermore, the farmers accustomed to the "old" cooperatives while unions and syndicates are new forms of organizations they need to learn the differences and potential complementarity between these different types of organizations. Mediation, exchange of experience with local industrial labour unions and other sectors and external similar syndicates can help farmers' unions become more efficient. However, after the second revolutionary wave of 2013, the 50s' constituent committee included two representatives of farmers; one to represent the syndicates and the other to represent the agricultural cooperatives. Despite the debate on the selection process, the representatives are struggling to better represent the interest and rights of farmers in the committee through their dynamic interaction with farmers' groups across the entire country and their contacts with the media. This means that the few tens of newly emerged

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