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# PROCESSES OF LIBERALIZATION AND FAMILY FARM RESTRUCTURING IN TUNISIA

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## **Abstract**

In Tunisia, as in many countries, movements of economic restructuring and shifts in state policies have been manifested in major transformations in the organization of agricultural production and in patterns of rural livelihoods. Structural adjustment policies, adopted in 1986 have been expressed in cuts in farm subsidies, agricultural price liberalization, and the reorganization of the farm credit system. They have significantly altered the economic environment of farming activities. At the household level, processes of restructuring have been manifested in important shifts in farm production patterns, as well as in the work strategies of family members.

Based on a survey of 60 farm households of the village of Bir Mcherga in a semi-arid region of northern Tunisia, this paper analyses the dynamics of farm restructuring from the perspective of the changing socio-economic strategies of family farm households. Exploring the diverse ways in which farm households members negotiate their changing access to economic resources, reorganize their farming activities and reallocate family labor, the paper also draws attention of the new patterns of social differentiation among family farms brought about by processes of liberalization and commoditization.

## **Introduction**

In Tunisia, as in many countries, movements of economic restructuring, and shifts in state policies have been manifested in major transformations in the organization of agricultural production and in patterns of rural livelihoods. Structural adjustment policies, adopted in 1986 have been expressed in cuts in farm subsidies, agricultural price liberalization, and the reorganization of the farm credit system. They have significantly altered the economic environment of farming activities. At the household level, processes of restructuring have been manifested in important shifts in farm production patterns, as well as in the work strategies of family members.

Farm households' dynamics have rarely been the main focus of analyses dealing with structural change in agriculture. Analyses of processes of agricultural and rural restructuring similarly have given little attention to the practices of the social actors involved in rural activities. Few of them have been interested in looking at the diverse responses of social groups and households to a changing market environment and in analyzing the role of the household in shaping structural change and new patterns of farm reorganization.

The purpose of the study I carried out in a farm household community of northern Tunisia was precisely to analyze and rethink the dynamics of farm restructuring from the perspective of the changing socioeconomic practices of family farm households.

My research objectives were more specifically:

1. to identify the diverse ways in which farm households members negotiate their changing access to economic resources, reorganize their farming activities and reallocate family labor.

2. to analyze the social dynamics that shape the changing practices of farm households, especially how family labor enables new patterns of farm organization and in turn how farm restructuring reshapes family labor relations, i.e. gender and intergenerational relations.

3. to examine how the changing access to resources and the shifting farm and work practices of rural households generate new patterns of social reproduction and differentiation among family farms and redefine the economic position of the different farming groups as well as the role of farm activities in household strategies of social reproduction?

This research draws on an empirical study of the changing farm and work practices of 60 farm households of the village of Bir Mcherga in the region of Zaghuan. This region, which is located at about 50 miles south of the capital Tunis, belongs to the semi-arid zone. Regional farm systems are predominantly based on cereal cultivation (wheat and barley) and extensive sheep rearing, and secondarily on dry fruit plantations, mainly olive trees. More recently irrigated farming and intensive livestock production has expanded in specific areas, in relation to development programs aimed at mobilizing water resources and intensifying farm production in small and medium size farms. Farm structure in the region is characterized by an important inequality in land distribution and the dominant position of large private and state owned farms. Regional dynamics have also allowed, at least until recently for the persistence of a large sector of small farm households, whose reproduction has been based both on farm activities and on off-farm employment.

Based on a series of questionnaire surveys, and on in-depth interviews with farm family members conducted between 1987 and 1997, my research has identified different patterns of family farm reorganization which express the diverse ways in which households have negotiated their changing access to resources, such as land, capital, and labor.

In this paper, I first outline the diverse patterns of farm household reorganization. I also examine the changes that can be observed in farm households' strategies of labor allocation and the tensions that they generate. I finally highlight the changes in farm household labor relations and examine how these dynamics allow us to rethink in a different way the analysis of family labor in agriculture.

Let us then examine how recent changes in the economic conditions of farm activities have been translated in the social and productive practices of the Bir Mcherga farm households and how these have mediated market pressures and reallocated their resources. Household's changing patterns of negotiating and allocating resources involve three aspects. 1. The reorganization of farm production, 2. the reorientation of household members' work strategies and 3. finally, the renegotiation of family labor relations.

### **The reorganization of farm production**

Recent changes in family farm households productive patterns can be analysed as the negotiated outcome of new dynamics of commoditization<sup>1</sup> and as an expression of the changing relationships between land, labor and capital in the process of agricultural production. The reorganization of farm production has been fostered by important changes in the conditions of access to land resources, due to an increased competition for farmland. In

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<sup>1</sup> Commoditization analyses focus upon the various ways in which exchange values, as opposed to use values, assume growing significance in the organization of economic and social life. Commoditization of agricultural production usually refers to the process by which farm resources and products are turned into commodities. Commoditization implies, for example, that access to land is increasingly arranged through market transactions, through purchase or rent and more generally that farm inputs and outputs are increasingly mobilized and valorized through market relations. Commoditization analyses also draw attention the transfer of production and reproduction tasks to outside agencies which undermines farm households independent decision making and the autonomy of the farm or what can be called dynamics of externalization, i.e. (Long, 1986).

fact, in the most recent period, access to land has become mainly dependent on the capacity of farm households to access credit and other financial means and to use the land as a productive capital, and not only as an instrument of family survival .

In this context; farm household adaptation strategies have followed two major and contradictory trends, according to their productive capacities and to the social projects of family members:

- First a strategy of farm production intensification, based on an increased use of both capital and labor,
- Second, a strategy of extensification based on the development of low input farm production patterns.

These two main strategies correspond in fact to three patterns of farm production reorganization.

#### *Extensification of farm techniques and retreat from cereal production*

Shifting production patterns have first corresponded to the declining capacities of a whole group of farm households to use the land as a unit of farm production, especially for grain cultivation. Under conditions of increasing production costs of cereal cultivation due to the discontinuation of subsidized credit programs which used to supply farm households with cheap seeds and fertilizers, adaptive strategies of a number of small farm households have aimed at reducing agricultural expenses and at minimizing production risks.

First, the inability to secure the availability of necessary farm inputs for grain production, has pushed a growing number of small landholders to lease out parts or the totality of their lands to other farmers or share croppers. Second, the declining capacities of a whole group of small farm households to cover expenses related to wheat production, have pushed a number of them to shift to less capital intensive and less risky productions. The substitution of barley to wheat cultivation is part of this strategy of reducing expenses and risks. Shift to barley cultivation, instead of wheat, is also associated with attempts to reorient livestock production on lower costs and more flexible activities, such as goats and sheep rearing instead of cattle, or free range poultry, while reorienting these activities increasingly towards the market and monetary income generation.

#### *Intensification of cereal cultivation and livestock production and farm systems diversification*

A second pattern of farm reorganization observed in some groups of small and medium size farms, has instead aimed at increasing farm productivity through an intensification of farm techniques and at diversifying farm production as an alternative to land extensive farm patterns. In this farm group, intensification of farm production, made possible by an increased integration in the credit system, is expressed in a more important and systematic use of certified seeds and fertilizers for grain production and is associated with a more important integration of livestock (cattle and sheep) in the farm production system. These strategies of intensification and diversification illustrate the increasing difficulty for family farm households to reproduce and consolidate their production units on the basis of extensive production models, under condition of higher competition for land.

#### *Shifting from dry farming to irrigation*

Shifts to more diversified and more labor intensive production systems have also included the development of irrigated farming. Both in small and medium size farms, irrigation has represented a major shift in household productive patterns. Fruit-tree plantations and vegetable cultivation have importantly reduced and some times totally eliminated cereal cultivation and extensive animal rearing, reorienting farm production mainly towards the market.

While irrigated farming has increased the dependence of family farms on the credit system and on the market, it has also enabled a whole group of small and medium farm households to negotiate a more important place in the system of agricultural production and to reinforce the role of farm activities in household income generation .

This reorganization of family farms production systems in the context of processes of economic liberalization indicate major changes in the relationships between land and capital in the process of agricultural production. More precisely, farm restructuring corresponds to the reorganization of land uses in favor of farm groups who can secure a continuing access to the capital markets and who are able to put in place more capital intensive farming patterns. Let us now examine how processes of commoditization reorganize family labor and reshape its relations with land and capital.

### **The reallocation of family labor**

As mentioned earlier, the crisis of family farm patterns of reproduction in Bir Mcherga is expressed in two major trends. First, it is manifested in the declining capacities of a whole group of small farm households to farm available land and a retreat from any capital intensive production, especially wheat. Second, changes in the economic environment of farm activities have been associated with shifts from predominantly land and labor- extensive farming patterns to more diversified and more capital and labor-intensive ones, such as intensive livestock production, food legumes, and vegetable cultivation. While, until recently, mechanized cereal farming and extensive sheep rearing had reduced the demand for family farm labor, these processes of diversification and intensification require now both more capital and more labor, and lead to growing tensions between the need to intensify family farm labor and to secure additional financial sources from off farm work.<sup>2</sup>

What are then the diverse strategies of reallocation of family labor which are associated with and condition the reorganization of family farm production systems? Different patterns of labor allocation have been identified based on the various ways in which labor is linked to capital (or substitute for it) and on how farm and off-farm activities are combined. These patterns of family labor reallocation are the following:

#### *Pluriactivity as a strategy of survival: men off the farm, women on the farm*

A first pattern of family labor reallocation is associated with households where farm work on small landholdings is part of a survival strategy based on pluriactivity. Here the pattern of family labor allocation is shaped by the low level of economic resources (namely limited land resources) and is increasingly influenced by the declining capacity to farm available land which pushes male family members to seek for off-farm jobs. In one out of four households covered by the survey, male family members work almost exclusively outside the farm (seasonal farm or non-farm wage work) and tend increasingly to disengage from farm work. This dynamic, also related to farm mechanization, is coupled with a more systematic involvement of women in specific farm activities and tasks, such as those which are more labor intensive and likely to reduce farm production costs as well as to generate complementary cash income sources.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Contradictions generated from processes of commoditization are exacerbated by the changing situation of the labor market (offering opportunities for certain types of work and limiting them for others) and the changing socioeconomic aspirations of family members, which tend either to turn them away from, or to reorient them towards farm work. Under these circumstances, the tensions in the allocation of family labor to diverse activities (on and off the farm) lead to a reorganization of the household division of labor as well as to a renegotiation of family labor relations.

<sup>3</sup> Work performed by wives and daughters include tasks likely to reduce costs, such as manual seeding, fertilizer application, harvesting, and carrying. Women's work has also a growing role in minimizing the costs of animal

Hence, while men's work strategies are geared towards securing cash income and satisfying family consumption needs through off-farm wage labor, women's labor, devoted to low input farm activities (poultry farming, goats rearing) is part of a strategy which substitutes labor for capital in the process of farm production. In this farming group, the sexual division of labor tends thus to correspond to a division between farm and off farm activities but not necessarily to a division between market and non market production. One should mention however that the growing monetary needs and the declining capacity of farm activities to generate cash income lead also female household members to take advantage of the few seasonal wage labor opportunities offered for women (mostly olive picking or horticulture related work). Thus, patterns of family labor allocation and the sexual division of labor in this farming group clearly indicate, more than a feminization of farm labor, a process of economic marginalization as farm producers and a movement out of agriculture, at least as far as the young generation is concerned.

*Pluriactivity and commercialized farming: increasing tensions in the allocation of family labor*

In contrast to the first pattern of labor reallocation, where off-farm and non-farm work become predominant in family survival strategies, strategies of labor reallocation promoted by movements of diversification and intensification draw family labor towards farm work without, however, undermining off-farm work and non-farm income generating activities. In fact, the capacity to shift towards more labor-intensive farm patterns (i.e. the capacity to mobilize family labor) has become more dependent on the capacity to mobilize capital to finance farm activities. Under these circumstances, the necessity to increase cash income for farm expenses and investments tends also to draw family labor towards off-farm activities, which generate growing tensions in the allocation of farm labor, either to farm work or to off-farm activities. The ways in which households negotiate the tensions generated by processes of diversification are influenced by a variety of factors, including the farm structures and the family cycle. They also reflect the various forms of integration into the market and are importantly shaped by household social projects and the aspirations of individual family members.

In most small intensifying farm households, off-farm activities, which provide financial resources for family and farm expenses, often mobilize one or several family members on a regular basis (taking them away from farm work). Under these circumstances, dynamics of diversification and intensification of small farm households have importantly drawn on farm women's and children's labor and have led to a profound reorganization of the sexual division of labor.

In an important percentage of farms that have introduced irrigation, women take in charge most farm tasks, from seeding to harvesting, including sometimes farm products marketing. Several examples show how, in a context where access to land is increasingly limited, efforts made by households to diversify and intensify farm production requires an increasing work load for family members, particularly for women. Access to family labor is in fact often restricted not only by factors such as off-farm employment of male family members, but also by the sociodemographic characteristics of household members, especially their level of education, which tend turn them away from farm work. These restrictions in the access to family labor have led several farm households to limit the importance of their projects of farm diversification and intensification.

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feed through pasturing or grass cutting. Their work also includes income generating activities, which do not rely on purchased inputs, such as poultry farming.

These dynamics indicate that the capacity to reorganize farm production is closely linked to household's capacity to mobilize family labor for farm work, and beyond household composition and family cycle, family labor reorganization appears to be mainly dependent on the capacity of farm households to retain children on the farm by offering them better opportunities of work and income. This can be observed in medium size farms where process of diversification and intensification have opened up new work opportunities for the young generation, encouraging mainly farmers' sons to engage more importantly in farming activities.

In this group of medium size farm households, processes of diversification, which have operated a major break with former patterns of accumulation based on extensive cereal cultivation and sheep rearing, have in general required an increased the contribution of family members to farm work (both men and women ), thus reinforcing the family basis of the labor organization. Research results indicate a double movement of return of family members to farm work: first, an increasing work load of farm women, previously marginalized by the predominance of mechanized grain cultivation or productions based on the use of hired labor; second, a return to the farm of the young generation, attracted by the more favorable conditions of farm work. In opposition to small farm households, strategies of labor allocation of intensive medium size farm households indicate thus a better capacity to mobilize family labor, due to a better capacity to generate financial resources and to secure higher level of income for the family.

Patterns of family labor allocation thus reveal important differences in the capacity of farm households to mobilize family labor for farm work and to resolve tensions between the necessity, on the one side, to make family labor available for farm work and, on the other side, to generate cash income from off-farm activities. These tensions seem to be better resolved in farm households with larger production capacities and where diversification of household activities does not conflict with farming. This does not mean however that access to family labor is only dependent on structural and economic factors. It is also tied to (and conditioned by) a renegotiation of gender and generation-based labor relations.

Let us then look at how processes of commoditization contribute to reshape family labor relations and the status of both women's and children's work.

### **Commoditization and the transformation of family labor relations.**

#### *The changing status of women's work and the changing division of labor*

Patterns of family labor reallocation indicate growing and new forms of women's involvement in farm work and in the functioning of the household economy, and are associated with major changes in the gender division of labor. While in previous periods, mechanization and cereal monoculture have reduced women's intervention in farm work and market production and limited female activities to domestic work, dynamics of diversification have helped to reverse this trend and have intensified women's participation in market production, both in low and high capital input activities. If this dynamic tends to reproduce some aspects of the gender division of labor (especially the division between mechanized and non mechanized work) and implies in some cases women's specialization in certain types of activities (small animal farming), it has also contributed to increase the flexibility and the complexity of the gender division of labor.

As dynamics of diversification/intensification reinforce women's role in commodity production and in monetary income generation, the gender division of labor tends to correspond less and less to a division between commodity production and non commodity production. These dynamics also transform the status of women's work on the farm, the latter being less and less perceived as a continuation of female domestic activities, but as real work.

Both farm women and farmers' discourses clearly indicate major changes in perceptions and attitudes towards women's labor in farm households. They undoubtedly illustrate the social recognition of women's work but the question of whether these new dynamics and attitudes correspond to a profound transformation in women's social and economic position in the farm household would need further analysis.

In any case, the Bir Mcherga evidence shows that women's growing involvement in the farm household economy corresponds to diverse and contradictory dynamics in terms of the social status of their activities and their social position within the household. The status of women's work and the way it is perceived mainly depends on their family status (farm women or farm daughter) and on the type of activities they are involved in.

Feelings of oppression and domination are often expressed by farm daughters, (whose work load has increased in relation to farm intensification, especially for livestock production and irrigated farming) and are often manifested in their aspirations to escape their life on the farm, either by marrying a non-farmer or by taking a job off the farm.

In other cases, the increasing work load of farm women is not necessarily perceived in a negative way, as it can be associated with a growing responsibility (and some times in an autonomization) in the management of certain activities, such as livestock production, and can generate both material and symbolic rewards. These dynamics have often led to a renegotiation of gender relations within the household and have increased the visibility of women's work on the farm.

#### *Commoditization and the renegotiation of intergenerational labor relations*

Similar dynamics are also to observe in the relationships between generations within the farm household. While in some cases, farm reorganization has contributed to the reinforcement of subordination relations within the family, in many other cases the continuing access to family labor could only be secured through concessions in patriarchal rights, and by taking into account the growing bargaining power of household members, in particular children.

In medium-sized farm households, where access to family labor is a major condition of farm diversification and intensification, daughters and sons (for whom off-farm employment could be an alternative to work on the family farm) have been able to negotiate their participation in farm work in exchange for material or social rewards. Like their mothers, daughters and younger sons increasingly exchange their work for the a right to keep a few animals on their own, using the family farm resources. This practice has become very common, especially among daughters who work on the family farm and who are often importantly involved in animal production. Income from these individually owned small herds (sheep usually) are used for personal expenses or savings.

These practices, which express an individualization process of productive activities and consumption needs, as well as the consolidation of bargaining powers of individual household members, point to the fact that family farm households are far from being these harmonious entities where family members share the same goals and interests and have the same needs. They indicate a commodification of family labor relations, since household members (both sons and daughters) are increasingly asking for compensation for their work on the family farm. Several examples can be given to illustrate how access to family labor is increasingly subject to tensions and negotiations within the household, and how commoditization reshapes the conditions of households' access to children's labor and increasingly mediates family labor relations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An important change taking place in family labor relations is the increased capacity for male heirs succeeding their fathers to impose conditions when engaging in farming activities. Usually, sons in line for succession, even when married, have to wait until the father dies before they can take some responsibility on the farm. Research



Several interviews draw attention to farmers' increasing awareness of the crucial role of wives and children for the continuation of farming activities in the context of the changing socioeconomic environment, and show that the availability of this labor is no longer taken for granted. Both changes in the gender division of labor and intergeneration relations contribute to challenge the traditional definition of family labor in terms of a fundamental opposition between kinship and commodity relations, and calls into question the assumption that family labor is by definition available and unpaid. Dynamics observed in the Bir Mcherga area invite us to depart from unfruitful exercises, trying to sort out commodity and non-commodity relations in family farms, and to focus instead on understanding how family labor relations are renegotiated and reshaped within the context of larger social and economic processes. A reconceptualization of family labor in farm households has also major implications for development policies, which very often rest on the assumption that women's and children's labor is always available for farm production.

Finally, processes of farm restructuring in Bir Mcherga point to the fact that in opposition to what has often been asserted by classical agrarian theories and feminist political economy, processes of commoditization can also contribute to reinforce the family basis of labor and women's involvement in farm production.

#### *Restructuring as a differentiation process*

In conclusion, I would like to come back to the new dynamics of social differentiation, which result from the reorganization of family farms and the transformation of household strategies. Restructuring processes can be analyzed as a series of breaks in the production and reproduction conditions of family farms:

- Break in the conditions defining access to land with a weakening of land rights based on family survival and a reconstitution of these land rights in favor of those who can use the land as a means of production.
- Break in the family farms' production and accumulation models, which move away from grain monoculture,
- Break in the organization of household labor, which tends to be more and more organized on a family basis.

A major aspect of farm restructuring in Bir Mcherga is the consolidation of a group of medium-size capitalized family farms, whose production and accumulation patterns increasingly move away from previous cereal-based and extensive production patterns. In this group of farm households, shifts to more intensive productive patterns, imposed by reduced access to land and encouraged by new credit opportunities, reinforce the family basis of farm labor organization. As state support (under the form of farm subsidies has been importantly reduced, the reproduction of this farm group has also become increasingly dependent on the diversification of both farm and non-farm activities.

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results reveal, however, that diverse strategies are deployed, granting sons willing to work on the farm more responsibility and autonomy. Particularly in medium-size farms, when additional income-generating activities can be promoted, sons have pressed their fathers to initiate these new activities and have insisted on taking over some responsibilities in their management (for example, for machinery rental services, the implementation of a new livestock unit, or the initiation of irrigated farming). Sharecropping contracts between fathers and sons also reflect such strategies. The transfer of some management responsibility to the younger generation has been further encouraged by new development programs, which make older farmers (over 55 years) ineligible for agricultural credits. In many cases, these new requirements have forced farmers to transfer part of the farm to their sons (either by rental or transfer of land ownership). Mechanisms of early and partial succession promoted by the new credit programs contribute to undermine patriarchal links and to reshape family labor relations by transforming the work status of the son and bestowing upon him a professional like status.

The second aspect of family farm restructuring is the emergence of a group of small farm producers who, while taking advantage of new credit and market opportunities, are increasingly orienting their strategies towards agricultural commodity production. Shifts in farming patterns and their increasing needs for both capital and labor, exacerbate the tensions between farm and off-farm work and require a renegotiation of family labor relations. Under these conditions, women engage increasingly in farm production and management, as well as in off-farm employment. Finally, processes of social recomposition and differentiation are manifest in the increasing marginalization (with respect to agricultural production, particularly grain) of small landholders where farming is part of a livelihood strategy based on pluriactivity. In this farm group, survival strategies, which involve shifts towards low input farm activities, are increasingly based on off-farm wage labor of household members, and indicate a movement of out of agriculture likely to be accelerated with the growing competition for land. These processes indicate important changes in the position of the different farming groups in agricultural production, as well as in their relationships to the state, as they challenge the utilization of land as a livelihood means and as a mechanism of social redistribution, and redefine the role of the state as a mediating factor in processes of commoditization.

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