A Recent History of the Fresh Milk Traditional Supply in El Cairo

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Introduction

El Cairo city is one of the largest cities in the world (around 20 millions of inhabitants). A big part of the fresh milk supply comes from two ways: the peri-urban farms and the farm inserted inside the urban network. In a diachronic approach, we will try to understand how those family dairy farms have changed during the last decades where major factors of change pressure their traditional activity.

Methods

In order to better understand the farming system, livelihood and adaptive strategy of these families during the recent history, we interviewed, on the one hand, 72 farmers, both in urban and peri-urban context, with a formal questionnaire on technical and socio-economical parameters and, on the other hand, fifteen stakeholders of dairy sector.

Results

Traditionally, the fresh milk supply of El Cairo was assumed both by:

- peri-urban farms: family scale, integrating cropping and breeding activity. A large amount of situations are represented. From the very small breeders renting some land (2 or 3 feddans) and who possess 1-2 dairy animals, to "big farm" with 20-30 feddans owned and a bigger herd (5-10 dairy animals). The main activity of those peri-urban farming systems is mostly based on cash-crops. Milk is mainly produce to cover the family consumption and the surplus is sold and joins the city supply chain. The collective management of the land and of the resources (especially the water with the Nile derivation or collective well) was in the heart of the system. A strong control on the area is a preliminary requirement for a good working of those agro-ecosystems.
- urban farms: this system exists in El Cairo since centuries according to the farmers. In this urban milk production system, breeders usually raise dairy herd in a barn surrounded by buildings or directly located into the ground floor of a building where the family is living. In the common cases of this system, the herd size is around 10-30 dairy buffalos kept attached indoor. The dairy activity was in the past the main economical incomes of those families. Another specifies can be noticed at this stage. Most of those farmers (in urban or in peri-urban context) traditionally prefer to raise dairy buffalos than dairy cattle. It can be explained by the high demand of buffalo milk due to consumers' preferences (taste, high percentage fat content, traditional cheeses, etc.), and also the high milk prices linked to the high fat rate of this product. The transition from the peri-urban system to the urban system can be explained by the city enlargement, converting agricultural land into urban landscape. If this phenomenon probably exists since a very long time, the recent demographical explosion during the last 30-40 years accelerated this dynamic. The city expansion was quite controlled 30 years ago by policies controlling the land conversion rate; at the beginning of the millennium, state control decrease and this conversion dynamic increase. In the recent past, the revolution weak considerably state's land control and anarchy on building is the most common rules those days in El Cairo. This city expansion creates huge changes in the per-urban farmer's organization. The drain and irrigation systems suffer from the urban conversion, decreasing the soil fertility and increasing the necessity, for the crop producers, to find alternative sources of incomes. For the land owners of per-urban lands, the increasing of the square meter price allowed them to change their capital management. For example, the renting contract for agricultural land changed from long term contracts (traditionally 15 years lease, with low prices), to annual contract with high prices (around 5000 EP per year per feddan today). It allowed them to invest in dairy milk production. With the growing of the city, big owners end up "enclosed" inside the city in few decades (sometimes even in few years in the recent past).

At the other side of the social scale, the small farmers who rent land became more and more vulnerable and most of them have no other choice than to stop agricultural activity.

The proximity with the market and the very short supply chain (most of the time direct sale from producer to consumer) was, and is still, one of the major advantages for those urban farms. According to the farmer point of view, the urban farming system was a very lucrative activity a few decades ago. But the political context has changed considerably and impacts those systems in a very rough way.

In the past, the government was helping this animal activity with several policies: feeding price support, animal insurance, effective veterinary services ..., and many public policies being based on cooperatives which don't act more. Today, all this public services disappear and let the farmer alone to face modern issues. The feed prices, the land pressure, the milk quality requirement represent major constraints for those urban farmers. To solve this modern equation they develop innovative strategy:

- in reproductive management: sale the dry buffalo and feed only milking animals.
- in feeding system: by using large amount of dry fodder (instead of the green) and by-products of the food industries (residues of oven, fruits residues...).

Conclusions

Unfortunately, the general trend is a very fast decrease of the number of those farmers, especially since the last 10 years. Most of them have no other choice than to stop their activity or to move outside of the border of El Cairo. The future Egyptian policies need to take into account that those producers represent a large source of fresh milk for the El Cairo market and this lack of production will need to be field in the future. In a context of dramatically unemployment in Egypt, the closing down of those farms grow the amount of precarious people.

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