

PROGRAMS OF THE DECENT LIFE INITIATIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF EFFORTS TO DEVELOP THE EGYPTIAN COUNTRYSIDE, A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE *

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Abstract

The current article is hoped to clarify, within a spatial critical approach, the proper assessment of the “Decent Life” projects in the sequence of rural development programs carried out in the Egyptian countryside during the recent and contemporary era.

The current distinguished effort is the National Project for the Development of Egyptian Villages works, within the decent life initiative, to improve the living conditions of the Egyptian countryside, is an integrated development initiative for the benefit of the "Egyptian countryside". The plan includes programs to improve infrastructure and services and increase family awareness. and it will be implemented over the next three years for the benefit of 4,500 villages.

The concept of human poverty has been expanded and is no longer limited to income poverty, but its dimensions have multiplied to include the health and cognitive conditions of the human being. Thus, the multi-dimensional poverty is considered a guide and an objective indicator of the levels of human development achievement.

From this standpoint, the current study relied on determining the levels of comprehensive rural poverty as evidence of the success or failure of efforts aimed at bringing about comprehensive and sustainable rural development. [*Bul. Soc. Géog. d'Égypte, Special issue, 2022, PP. 179 - 197*].

Key Words: Egyptian countryside; Rural poverty; Rural development; Decent Life initiative.

1) Introduction:

The Egyptian village is the backbone of the Egyptian society. It is the origin of the ancient Egyptian civilization since the dawn of history. It is the residence agglomeration of the rural population. It reflects the features of the rural man, his physical, environmental, and social conditions, as well as his life and functional requirements.

In February 2016, the government launched a national agenda called "Egypt Vision 2030" that reflects the state's long-term strategic plan to achieve sustainable development principles and objectives in all economic, social, and environmental fields. Egypt has adopted by the end of 2016 an economic reform program that included the liberation of the local currency, gradual lift of subsidy on fuel and electricity, as well as endorsement of a package of economic legislations. The government launched social policies and initiatives like "Decent Life" that directly improved the citizens' daily life in terms of houses' quality, sanitation, and health services.

The Egyptian "Decent Life Initiative" came in line with the seventeen global goals launched by the United Nations in 2015 for sustainable development, which is aiming to be achieved by 2030. Those goals include: a source of clean water and sanitation, the availability of affordable energy and electricity sources, the availability of urban communities, a suitable job opportunity, and a life in peace, stability, and a balanced environment.

The Ministry of Social Solidarity announced on November 16, 2020, that, within the "Decent Life" initiative, a list of the poorest 1,000 villages (rural communities) all over Egypt was prepared, arranged in descending order of poverty rate, which are villages in which the poverty rate exceeds 55%. The targeted villages have been identified according to the poverty map database issued by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in 2017-2018. The Ministry indicated that 143 villages were targeted in the first phase (the fiscal year 2019-2020), and the number of targeted villages increased in the second phase to 232 villages, and it is expected that 1,000 villages will be targeted by the end of the 2023-2024 fiscal year (akhbarelyom.com, 2020).

The views of those concerned with the development and progress of human societies have agreed that the triad of ignorance, poverty and disease is the most dangerous thing that destroys societies, or halts or impedes their growth,

at the very least. The concept of human poverty has been expanded and is no longer limited to income poverty, but its dimensions have multiplied to include the health and cognitive conditions of the human being. That is why the comprehensive description of poverty and its levels have become a guide and an objective indicator of the levels of human development achievement.

The current article is hoped to clarify, within a spatial critical approach, the proper assessment of the “Decent Life” projects in the sequence of rural development programs carried out in the Egyptian countryside.

2) Theoretical insights:

- Integrated Rural Development

The Integrated Rural Development (IRD) approach became popular in the 1970s and was fueled by substantial donor allocations during the 1970s and 1980s. IRD was a holistic way to improve well-being in a community unit along social, economic and environmental dimensions. The approach drew on systems thinking, an emphasis on local participation and community ownership, and on observations that economic growth was not necessarily benefiting the rural poor directly. While there were some outstanding IRD successes, the barrier seemed to be their scaling up. Too little was invested in the managerial and institutional development, hence project evaluations reported unsustainable and unsatisfactory performance of IRD efforts (USAID, 2005).

- Multi-dimensional Poverty

Multi-dimensional poverty assesses the nature and intensity of poverty by identifying multiple deprivations (in health, education and standard of living) and the extent of these at the individual level. It uses micro data from household surveys and can be aggregated into the national measure of poverty assessed in line with the standard UNDP definition, looking at indicators of health (nutrition, child mortality), education (child enrollment and years of schooling) and living standards (measure of assets a toilet and cooking fuel) (Alkire, and Santos, 2010).

3) Methodology:

The current study adopts a spatial critical approach to realize the proper assessment of the “Decent Life” projects in the sequence of rural development programs carried out in the Egyptian countryside.

The study relied on determining the levels of comprehensive rural poverty as evidence of the success or failure of efforts aimed at bringing about comprehensive and sustainable rural development.

The study began with a focus on the context of stages and signs of development efforts in the Egyptian countryside in the modern and contemporary era. The position of the projects of the “Decent Life Initiative” is discussed, in terms of being a continuation and completion of it, or an awakening to a state of slack and slow achievement or being a new strategic thought regarding rural development sustainable in Egypt.

The study then discussed the outcomes of the rural development process, with its successes and failures, as evidenced by the rates of rural poverty and the extent to which development contributed to mitigating or eliminating it.

The study information and data were collected from multiple sources, including the official authorities responsible for planning and implementing development projects, statistical monitoring of variables, reports and studies related to the subject, in addition to field observations of the researcher for rural development projects that he experienced by virtue of his residence in the rural environment.

4) Findings

4.1: The Sequence of the Rural Development Policies in Egypt

The official efforts to develop the Egyptian countryside began, perhaps, with the issuance of Royal Decree for Law No. 30 of 1944 dated 23/3/1944 regarding rural agricultural reform. The article 20 of that Law indicated that the Ministers of Agriculture, Finance, Interior, Trade, Industry, Public Health and Social Affairs shall implement this law, each in its jurisdiction.

Some scholars attempted to define evolutionary phases or stages for rural development policies in Egypt, such as (Soliman, & Gaber, 2010), (Elmenofi, et al., 2014), and the author (Eisa, 2019) who divided the evolutionary development of rural projects implemented in Egypt in the recent into two types: the partial sectoral projects directed to bring about improvement and partial development in one sector of the rural environment, and the institutional holistic projects adopted by governmental institutions to bring about the village development in all aspects sectors.

For Analytical purposes, the economic, social and institutional policies related to rural development in Egypt were divided in this study into seven periods:

4.1.1: First period (before 1952): Initial Improvement Issues

It had been setup as follows: the agricultural cooperatives started in 1927 – the Agricultural credit Bank was established in 1931- a new ministry of Social Affairs was established in 1939 included the “Farmer Department” - the Egyptian ministry of health set up in 1942 the village health units - the ministry of Agriculture in 1944 started the agricultural compound units in large villages - social centers were expanded in 1945 to the villages with more than 10,000 inhabitants. That center included outpatient clinic, a rural school, and a rural industrial training center.

4.1.2: Second period (1952- 1973): Revolutionary Reforms

It started by the 1952 revolution which issued the agriculture reform law determining the size of land ownership, moving to the less limits of agricultural land ownership by July 1961 to be a maximum of 100 feddans per one family and 50 feddans per single individual. The general services council was established in 1953 to support the service programs particularly in rural areas. The assembled units were established in 1956 to provide various economic, social, health and educational services to rural areas.

The central planning policy was adopted during 1960 –1973, involving the first five years plan (60/1965) when the government depended mainly on the agriculture sector to finance development in other sectors.

4.1.3: Third period (1973 – 1993): Institutional Rural Development policies

In 1973, the Organization for Reconstruction and Development of the Egyptian village (ORDEV) as the local governance ministerial committee responsible about designing the general plan of village development in various aspects through coordination and integration. Its role starts from projects identification up to following up the implementation stages. It also, supports the local community efforts, evaluation of available opportunities and resources, making research and specialized studies for the village development.

Unfortunately, the lack of efficiency and enthusiasm among relevant ministries could not achieve “true” integrated rural development. In 1976 the role of agricultural cooperatives was weakened due to the establishment of village banks that took most of their activities.

4.1.4: Fourth period (1994-2007): Integrated Rural Development Program

The National Integrated Rural Development Program “Shorouk” applied through ORDEV, adopted a specific strategy and notion that incubates all public and governmental efforts to achieve real rural development that assures integration and coordination and people’s participation in the developmental process – its philosophy depending on people’s participation as the core of development while governmental efforts (financial and technical support) are seen as complementary. The first years of the project have been lasted in identifying the target villages and building up development programs. Implementation was focused upon infrastructure improvement in the Egyptian villages, such as the networks of drinking water, roads, electricity, sewage, and communication. A big push was also, given to human development, in terms of social, educational and health services. The women and children in the rural communities were the main target groups, whom much care was received. The program due to financial problems was terminated in 2005.

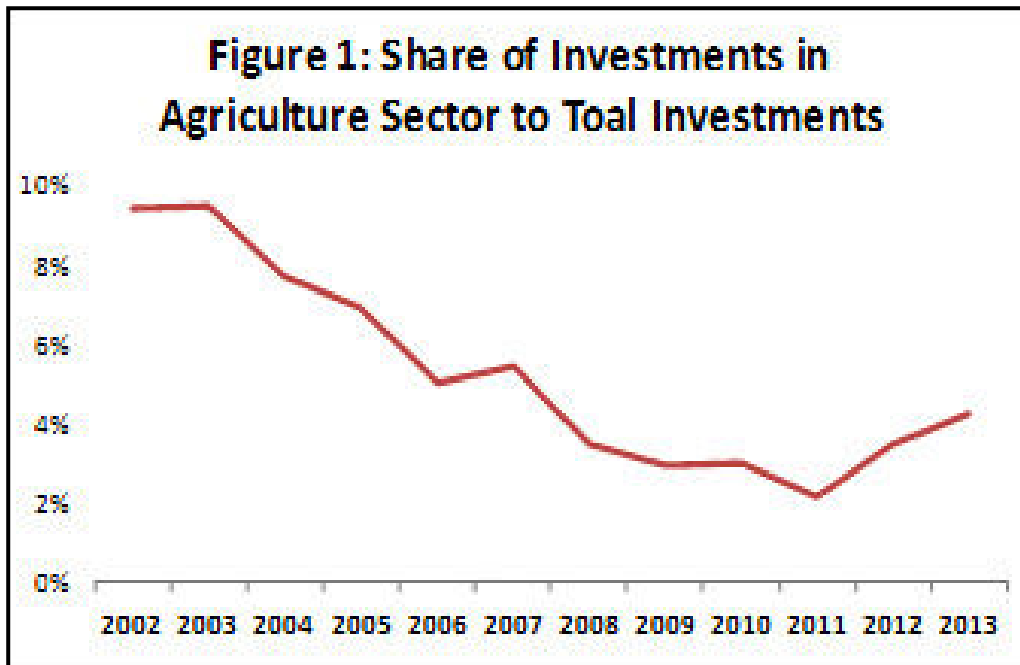
4.1.5: Fifth period (2007-2012): National project to improve poorest village.

This national project targeted to improve the livelihood of the poorest 1000 villages within the five years plan (2007-2012) through two stages: The first three years (2006-2009) included development of 150 villages in 6 governorates. The second stage included 850 villages in 10 governorates (Soliman, & Gaber, 2010).

According to Law 119/2008, the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP) became the responsible of formulating a public policy for planning and sustainable physical development, including preparing plans for an estimated 4409 villages with its development limits to the year 2027. Furthermore, the program is instrumental in executing another program for alleviating poverty from the most one thousand poorest villages in Egypt (GOPP, 2014).

4.1.6: Sixth period (2011- 2018): Cease or retreat of rural development and recovering initiatives.

As a passive effect of the Egyptian revolution, January 25, 2011, on different sectors of the economy, especially in investments in the private sector as a study conducted by Hosny in 2016, noted a decline in share percentage of investments in agriculture sector to the total investments from 9.5% in 2002 to 3% in 2011 (Fig. 1). This retreat indicates to the impact of instable conditions before and during the revolution (Hosny, 2016).



Source: Hosny, 2016.

Figure 1. Share of investments in agriculture sector to total investments

Those who took responsibility, after overcoming the unstable conditions in Egypt in the January 2011 and June 2013 revolutions, had to launch several reform initiatives. Two initiatives were related to the Egyptian countryside in particular. The first initiative was launched in 2016 to cultivate one and a half million feddans located in the Moghra, Farafra, West Minya, south of the Qattara Depression, Kom Ombo, and Toshka areas. The second was the irrigation canals rehabilitation and lining project implemented by the Ministry of Irrigation as a one pillar of the National Water Resources Plan (2017-2037).

4.1.7: Seventh period: (2019 - ..) The national project to raise the efficiency of 1,000 villages

This current period is tied up with the presidential “Decent Life Initiative”.

According to the official website of the Egyptian Presidency, the Villages Development Project is part of a decent life initiative launched by President El-Sisi on January 2, 2019, to improve the standard of life for the most needy community groups in Egypt, particularly the residents of 4584 villages who

represent 58% of the total population. The project seeks to provide an integrated package of services, including: utilities and infrastructure services (roads and transportation - sewage and drinking water - electricity and public lighting - natural gas - development of local units - youth and sports - health and education services), economic development and job creation (establishment of industrial complexes - vocational rehabilitation - provision of projects with economic returns - employment of villagers to build their homes - waste recycling - agricultural and fishery development), social interventions and the provision of decent housing (literacy and education - decent housing - awareness campaigns, cultural and sports, psychological and social rehabilitation - bride preparation and debt payment).

The first phase of the project targeted the development of villages most in need with a total of 375 rural communities, including 4.5 million beneficiaries with a total investment of 13.5 billion pounds to implement 2,180 projects, 600 projects have been completed, and 1,580 projects are being implemented.

The second phase of the project aims to develop all of 4,209 villages, in addition to 30,900 Ezba (hamlet). Minister of Local Development launched the second phase of the “Decent Life Initiative” on 17/10/2020 with investments of 9.6 billion pounds, which targets 375 rural communities in 14 governorates, most of them in Upper Egypt, where the governorates of central and southern Upper Egypt together include 315 villages, representing 84% of the total villages targeted in the phase. The second is that it is planned to complete the work in all the villages targeted in the initiative, which are 1,000 villages by the end of the fiscal year 2023/2024 (www.elwatannews.com).

5) Discussion

5.1: The Poverty Map used in defining the Poorest 1000+ Villages

There are two issues of the Egyptian poverty map:

- The first poverty map has relied upon “the Poverty Assessment Report in Egypt” issued in mid-2007 by the Ministry of Economic Development in collaboration with the World Bank. It had been used in the National Project for Targeting Needy Rural Households, wherein they were classified according to the degree of poverty into four groups: the extremely poor, the poor, the near poor, and non-poor. Each group has specific characteristics that determine the size and the quality of the benefits that they will get. For example, the

characteristics of extremely poor households are: (1) Family members are five or more (rural area), and six or more (urban area); (2) The percentage of working individuals is less than 25%; (3) Rooms per capita are less than 50%; (4) Household head does not have social security; (5) There is no private bathroom; (6) The electricity bill is less than 15 EGP (rural areas), and less than 20 EGP (urban areas); (7) There is no landline telephone; (8) The household does not live in an independent apartment or a rural house built of red brick or better (in rural areas); (9) The head of the household does not have a permanent job or is illiterate (in urban areas) (Soliman, & Gaber, 2010).

Focusing on income and expenditure within the one thousand poorest villages, the analysis undertaken by EL-Tawila et al, with a representative sample of 141 villages out of the one thousand, showed that toward the end of 2009, a person in Egypt was considered poor if s/he spent on average less than LE 197 per month (LE 2364 per year) and those who spent less than LE 148 per month (LE 1776 per year) were considered ultra-poor (El-Tawil et al, 2013).

Figure 2. exposes the distribution of the poorest 1000 villages in the Egyptian governorates in 2011 depending on the previous criteria.

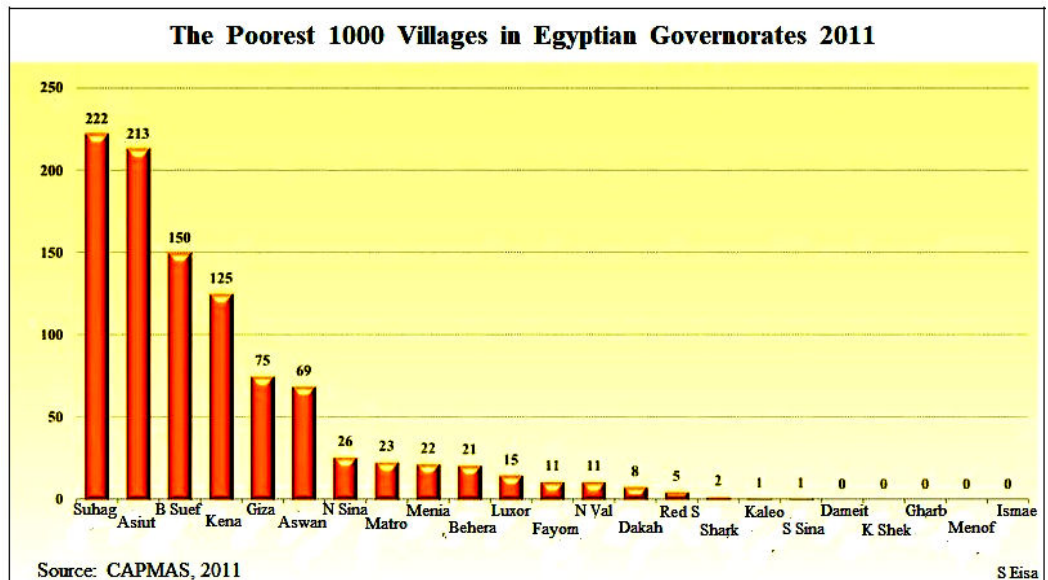


Figure 2. The poorest 1000 villages in Egyptian governorates 2011

A noteworthy comparison must be made regarding the percentage of Upper Egypt's rural and urban populations to the country's total respective population. 28% of Egypt's urban population is in Upper Egypt, whereas a significant 44% of Egypt's rural population is in Upper Egypt. Poverty in Upper Egypt is mainly structural/chronic one that is driven by lack of adequate public infrastructure, private capital accumulation, and low investment in human capital and the absence of pro-poor program-based fiscal policy, which collectively lead to deterioration in living standards in Upper Egypt, compared to other regions (Egypt Network, 2015).

There is strong evidence that justifies targeting of rural Egypt and especially rural Upper Egypt for social protection and economic development. Discrimination in public spending in favor of the South is not only called for on account of differentials in poverty levels and deprivation but can be justified in terms of comparative advantage for job creation in labor intensive agriculture processing, manufacturing and tourism (Egypt Network, 2015).

Reports completed by the World Bank indicate that the highest share of the nation's poor population lives in upper rural Egypt, in addition to the inequality and poverty divide in Egypt between wealthier urban families and poorer rural families. There are some explanations for the poverty divide in Egypt (Marcetti, 2019):

Agriculture accounts for approximately 27 percent of the total Egyptian workforce and 55 percent of employment opportunities in rural upper Egypt are related to agriculture. This means that as Egypt continues to modernize its economy in its urban centers, those in more rural, agriculturally focused regions such as upper Egypt and the Nile River valley will inherently be forced to find more reliable and modern sources of employment in urban centers. Agriculture constitutes too small a percentage of Egypt's economy (11.7 percent of the total GDP as of 2017) (Marcetti, 2019).

- The second poverty map is based on the results of the income, expenditure and consumption research for the year 2017-2018, that results were announced on July 29, 2019. The CAPMAS announced that the poverty rate in Egypt had risen to 32.5% in 2017-2018, compared to 27.8% according to the 2015 income and expenditure research, achieving an increase of 4.7% (www.masrawy.com). According to these results, Tab.1 and Figures 3 & 4 expose the spatial distribution of the poorest villages, 2018, in terms of its number and percentage in the Egyptian governorates.

It is clear that Suhag, Assiut, and Menia governorates in Upper Egypt have more than 600 poorest villages, and Behera governorate is the only in Lower that as more than 150 poorest villages. On the other hand, the governorates of Damietta, Kafr El-Sheikh, Gharbia, Menoufia, Fayoum, Beni-Suef, and Luxor, in addition to Urban governorates, do not have any poor village. Other rural governorates have a number of poorest villages ranging between 5 – 60 ones.

Table 1. Percentages of the poorest villages to the total of governorates 2018

| Governorate | Villages* | Poorest | % | Governorate | Villages* | Poorest | % |
|--|------------------|----------------|----------|--------------------|------------------|----------------|----------|
| Cairo | 0 | 0 | 0 | B. Suef | 219 | - | 0 |
| Alexandria | 5 | 4 | 80.0 | Fayoum | 163 | - | |
| Port-Said | 0 | 0 | 0 | Menia | 361 | 163 | 37.7 |
| Suez | 0 | 0 | 0 | Assiut | 235 | 207 | 88.1 |
| Damietta | 80 | - | 0 | Suhag | 264 | 236 | 89.4 |
| Dakahlia | 486 | 5 | 1.0 | Qena | 152 | 60 | 39.5 |
| Sharkia | 500 | 5 | 1.0 | Luxor | 54 | | 0 |
| Kalyoubia | 197 | 8 | 4.0 | Aswan | 127 | 39 | 30.7 |
| K E Sheikh | 225 | - | 0.0 | Red Sea | 12 | 7 | 58.3 |
| Gharbia | 321 | - | 0 | W Gadid | 128 | 30 | 23.4 |
| Menoufia | 315 | - | 0 | Matrouh | 57 | 27 | 47.3 |
| Beheira | 488 | 155 | 31.7 | N Sinai | 85 | - | 0 |
| Ismailia | 38 | 6 | 15.8 | S Sinai | 14 | - | 0 |
| Giza | 168 | 26 | 5.5 | Egypt | 4696 | 1000 | 21.3 |
| * Ministry of Local Development, 2019 = CAPMAS, 2018 | | | | | | | |

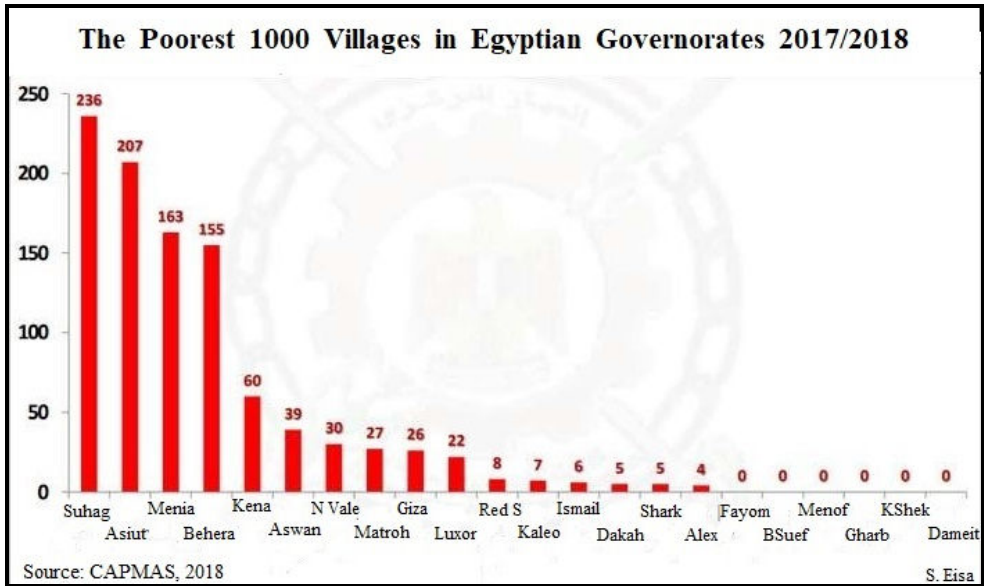


Figure 3. The poorest 1000 villages in Egyptian governorates 2017/2018

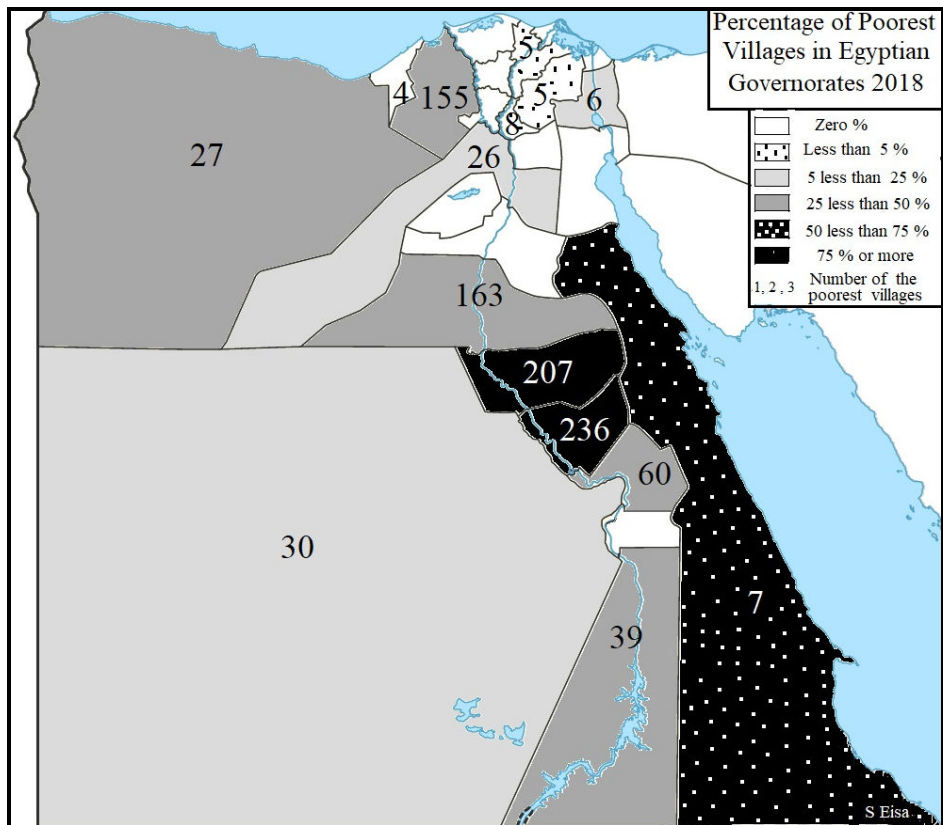


Figure.4. Percentage of poorest villages in Egyptian governorates 2018

Although the improvement of poverty rate in the rural areas of Upper Egypt, 52% of its population in 2017/2018 still incapable to meet their basic needs for food and other things. About 66% of the poor still live in the countryside, and 40.3% of the total poor live in rural Upper Egypt, while 25.2% of the total population of Egypt lives there, as shown in Tab. 2 and Fig. 5.

Table 2. Population and Poor rates in the Egyptian cultural regions 2017/2018

| | Urban governorates | Urban Lower Egypt | Rural Lower Egypt | Urban Upper Egypt | Rural Upper Egypt |
|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Population rate % | 19.0 | 12.0 | 31.6 | 10.8 | 25.2 |
| Poor rate % | 15.6 | 5.3 | 26.5 | 10.0 | 40.3 |

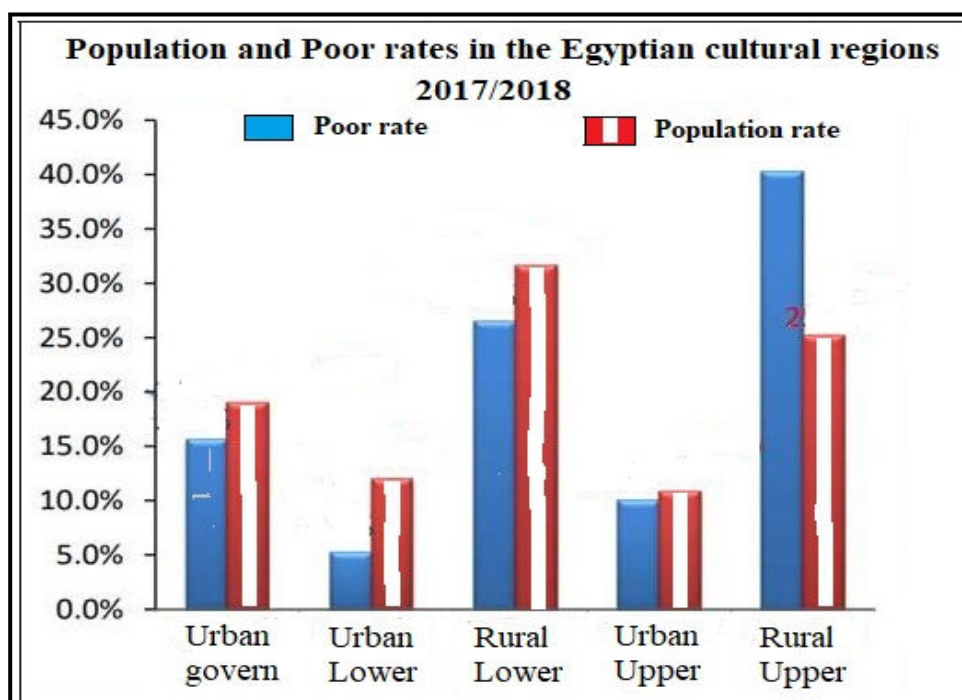


Figure 5. Population & Poor rates in Egyptian cultural regions 2017/2018

5.2: Implementation performance in Decent life Initiative projects

The official page of the Decent Life Initiative displayed the percentages of achievement in the Decent Life Initiative in the projects and works that have been completed as follows (Ibrahim, 2022).

- Providing basic services 33%
- Improving the rate of access to basic services in some villages by 50%
- Reducing poverty rates in some villages by 14%.

In a numerical report dated by January 16, 2022, the achievements of the Decent Life projects in some sectors are enumerated in the following numbers (Ibrahim, 2022):

- Health sector: medical convoys (175), veterinary convoys (43), eye glasses (9150), cataract operations (3920), surgeries (1060), Nurseries (3000), veterinary units (82), medical units (51).
- Social sector: Youth Centers (26), social units (9).
- Housing sector: building (120 thousand units) (Fig. 6), efficiency raise (12 thousand units) (Fig. 7).
- Water and sewage sector: domestic sewage tanks (706), treatment plants (130), domestic sewage connections (1680), household water connections (1675).
- Education sector: development and establishment of (127 schools), (2311 classrooms), literacy of (3000 citizens).
- Road's sector: lampposts (9500), paving (188000 km).

It is reported that integration between the government and the private sector was the key to achieving development within the villages of the first phase, which was launched in 2019 and included 143 villages in 11 governorates. The Misr El Kheir Foundation contributed to the development of 37 of them in 4 governorates: Menia, Assiut, Suhag and Qena.

Civil society institutions work according to the capabilities of the association or institution within the governorate and in coordination with the officials of the Decent Life Initiative at the Ministry of Social Solidarity, in addition to holding a periodic meeting every 15 days to follow up the implementation work and submit a monthly report to the Ministry.



Figure 6 A: rural unite built by the Decent Life project



Figure 7 A: service building efficiency raised by the Decent Life project

6) Conclusions

1- The Egyptian countryside is one of the most ancient geographical features in history, stable in spatial distribution, and in need of continuous development plans and strategies.

2- The “Development of Egyptian Villages” project aims at a comprehensive and integrated change for all villages of Egyptian countryside, accounted in “4741 villages” and “30888” belonging ezbah. The development includes aspects of infrastructure, services, living, social and health aspects.

3- Lessons learned from evaluating the evolution of rural development:

- Awareness for application of the integrated and sustainable rural development
- Necessity for automation, interlocking and unified databases
- Utilization of geographic information systems and communication technologies
- Positive participation of beneficiaries at all stages
- Governance to prevent corruption by applying transparency and accountability
- Rooting sustainable thinking in planning, implementation, and follow-up
- Objectivity and accounted ambition in planning for the future.

4- According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics report on December 3, 2020, Egypt's poverty rate declined to 29.7 percent in the 2019-2020 fiscal year, down from 32.5 percent two years earlier. This is the first time Egypt has seen a decrease in its poverty rate since 1999.

5- The study pointed out that the "Decent Life" initiative should be accompanied by an initiative to reshape and consolidate the Egyptian identity in the Egyptian countryside, as it should be based on building the Egyptian person (ECSS, 2021).

Recommendations

1- The initiative of a decent life should not be limited to being a rescue operation for villages mired in extreme poverty, or in assembling and coordinating the dispersed efforts of the concerned bodies in the countryside after the suspension or disruption of the existed ones, the latest of which is "Shorouk" Project.

2- The initiative must be the beginning of a new, long-term phase to reshape the Egyptian countryside, after many of its pillars were shaken, foremost of which is the eroding agricultural land in the face of constructive encroachment, the deterioration of agricultural production and its inability to meet the needs, the change in social systems and cultural values, and the change of rural housing.

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