4 Agriculture and Forestry

A general importance

At present the two key economic sectors in the Sudan are transport and agriculture. Agricultural production is the major marketable commodity of the Sudan and transportation is required to get this product to the market places of the world. In addition to its strategic importance as a net earner of foreign exchange, agriculture exerts a tremendous quantitative impact on the fortunes (or vicissitudes) of the Sudan. Agriculture contributes close to 40 per cent of Gross Domestic Product, generates over 90 per cent of the Sudan’s merchandise exports, provides the bulk of raw materials needed for local industries, and provides employment opportunities for over three-fourths of the work force.¹

Approximately 200 million feddans of the total area of the Sudan (625 million feddans) is considered suitable for crop or pastoral farming. At the present time one-half of this area is being used for growing crops and for pastoral activities, largely in an unsystematic fashion. As of 1975 approximately 16 million feddans were under cultivation, and of this about 4 million acres were irrigated.²

A great variety of agricultural crops can be grown in the Sudan, including cotton, grains, fruits and vegetables. A basic constraint on agricultural production is availability of water. For this reason expansion of agricultural production has taken place along the Nile, its main tributaries, and in the regions of the Sudan endowed with adequate rainfall.

There are three main types of agriculture practised in the Sudan. These include irrigated agriculture, rain-fed agriculture, and traditional agriculture. Irrigated agriculture is limited mainly to the area lying between the Blue and White Nile, and smaller areas along the Atbara and Rahad Rivers. In these areas long-staple cotton, groundnuts, wheat, and fruits and vegetables are cultivated. Rain-fed agriculture is carried out mainly in the region east of the Blue Nile in the general area of Gedaref, and in southern Kordofan.
Province. A large part of this activity is mechanised and very extensive land areas are involved. Production is concentrated in sorghum, sesame, and short-staple cotton. In recent years wheat, groundnuts, and sesame production has increased rapidly in these rain-fed regions. Traditional agriculture is carried out in the central and western areas of the Sudan, as well as in all of the southern region. Very little surplus product is available for market. Livestock production has remained organised along traditional lines and consequently limits the return accruing to the livestock producer.

Mechanisation of Sudanese agriculture is reflected in Table 4-1 (lines 1 and 2). It is expected that additional mechanisation will become necessary due to some tightening up in the labour market, lower mobility of workers, and increased need for the achievement of high productivity. Rationalisation is taking place in Sudanese agriculture as marginal land is shifted from cotton cultivation to uses where greater overall productivity can be attained or where self-sufficiency can be promoted. The flat series (Table 4-1) for cotton production reflects shifting use of land away from cotton in established cultivated areas and increased acreage use in more recently developed agricultural regions. Some of the land taken out of cotton cultivation has been shifted to wheat or sugar production. During the 1960s the Gezira witnessed a considerable expansion in wheat acreage.

Sudan gums have been known in world trade for at least two thousand years. Gum arabic, which constituted between 5 and 10 per cent of Sudan's exports in the period 1969-73, has long been a leading source of export revenue. While collected in the traditional sector it is purely a cash crop. Virtually all of the gum arabic produced in the Sudan is exported. Sudan is the world's largest source of gum arabic, with 75 to 85 per cent of total world output. Kordofan and Darfur Provinces in western Sudan are the main production centres of gum arabic. In 1969 the government formed the Gum Arabic Exporting Company Ltd, a public company in which the government participation was at 30 per cent of the capital. This company now handles all of the gum trade of the Sudan with the objectives of improving the distribution, stabilising prices, and maximising the returns earned by the Sudan on gum exports.

Agricultural production enters into the foreign trade of the Sudan in an important way. Virtually all of the Sudan's merchandise exports is made up of agricultural products. Exports of cotton constitute 55–60 per cent of exports, oil seed and oil cake exports constitute another 17 per cent and 6 per cent of exports, respectively. Exports of gum arabic have accounted for 8–10 per cent of exports. Finally, livestock products make up another 7 per cent of merchandise exports. On the import side agricultural products also