Egypt’s conundrum over food security and the Nile’s water

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Russia’s decision this year to halt wheat exports has dealt Egypt a severe blow and brought many questions to the fore. Egypt’s population explosion is fast surpassing its agricultural capacities, and the Nile river water resource, which irrigates its reduced wheat farms, has also come under heavy scrutiny as other Nile riparian countries seek a break from colonial era agreements that give Egypt and Sudan about 90% of the Nile’s water. The clock is ticking away with incredible speed as Egypt tries to develop external strategies. Strategies that are increasingly becoming risky for Egypt.

In August 2010, Egyptians discovered that an environmental catastrophe in Russia could directly affect their livelihoods after Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin announced that his country was suspending the exportation of wheat because of devastating bush fires that had consumed large portions of its wheat farms. The Egyptian government assured citizens that the Russian decision would not have an immediate impact on the country as it had some 3 Million tons of wheat in reserve, enough for a few months ahead.

Egypt is presently the second biggest importer of wheat worldwide, and Egyptians stand to suffer should the Russian decision linger for more than the “few months” needed before a complete depletion of the country’s wheat reserves. Egyptians are worried and the public is demanding answers to some vital questions.

Why is Egypt, a country that once exported large quantities of wheat, now threatened by an act of God that takes...
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Foreign lands

This proposal comes several months after the Egyptian government began considering other options including growing Egypt's wheat requirement in countries with enough arable land to spare. And in a backdrop of a longstanding disagreement over the Nile's water resource with Ethiopia, which leads the group of upper riparian Nile basin countries to renegotiate Egypt and The Sudan's vast water share, the two countries (Egypt and Ethiopia) on December 30, 2009 signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish an Ethiopia-Egypt Council of Commerce.

The possibility of growing Egyptian wheat and other cereals on fertile lands in Ethiopia became known when it was revealed that the Horn of Africa country was ready to grant 20,000 hectares of land to Egypt, making the latter the biggest foreign acquirer of agricultural land in Ethiopia, yet.

Early September 2010, Egypt again signed another deal, this time, with the Sudanese government. The deal gives Egyptian agricultural entities access to arable lands in The Sudan. Dr. Ayman Farid Abo-Hadid signed the deal on behalf of the Egyptian government, saying "Growing essential crops like wheat in other water-rich African countries where fertile land is in abundance is an important solution," and "Cultivating wheat in other African countries will reduce the cost of imports."

It is not known whether or not Dr. Abo-Hadid who argued that Egypt should modify its "wheat planting dates" still stands by his proposal. In the meantime, Egypt's future, faced with an increasing population, the ever encroaching
desert, the Nile water crisis, and above all the Russian wheat crisis, hangs in the balance. It is a bleak future that calls for long term domestic strategies to safeguard food security.

And domestic strategies are of the essence, as foreign land grabs by countries continue to attract widespread condemnation. A report by the the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a Washington-based think tank, suggested that “the state often formally owns the land, the poor run the risk of being pushed off the plot in favor of the investor, without consultation or compensation.” To this end, anti-poverty campaigners Action Aid have called for an independent United Nations commission to establish an enforceable code of conduct in the purchase of foreign lands.

A typical example took place in 2009 when South Korean firm Daewoo Logistics was forced to abandon a project to lease one million acres of land in Madagascar to produce corn following criticism that local people had not been consulted.

This makes the Egyptian external agricultural land deals all the more fragile as a future government or policy change in Ethiopia or Sudan risks destabilizing their external food security strategy.

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