



BEYOND THE RENTIER STATE –  
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION  
POLICY IN SOUTHERN RURAL JORDAN

Katharina Lenner  
University of Bath  
[k.lenner@bath.ac.uk](mailto:k.lenner@bath.ac.uk)

# Beyond the rentier state: the social life of poverty alleviation policy

- Common political science & practitioner narrative: rural Transjordanians as privileged recipients of state largesse / rentier economy (public sector employment, military, donor-funded projects etc.)
- Problem diagnosis: 'rent-seeking mentality'
- Focus of this paper: poverty alleviation / local development schemes targeting rural populations & their effects
- Poverty alleviation and local development policy as technology of government, and as social relation shaped by everyday practices of government and interaction of between bureaucrats, (potential) 'clients' etc. → social life of policy

# Social life of poverty alleviation policy in Busayra and Wadi Araba

Agencies involved, e.g.

JVA – Jordan Valley Authority

ASEZA – Aqaba Special Economic Zone

Authority

RSCN – Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature

JRF – Jordan River Foundation

Lafarge Cement

GEF – Global Environmental Facility

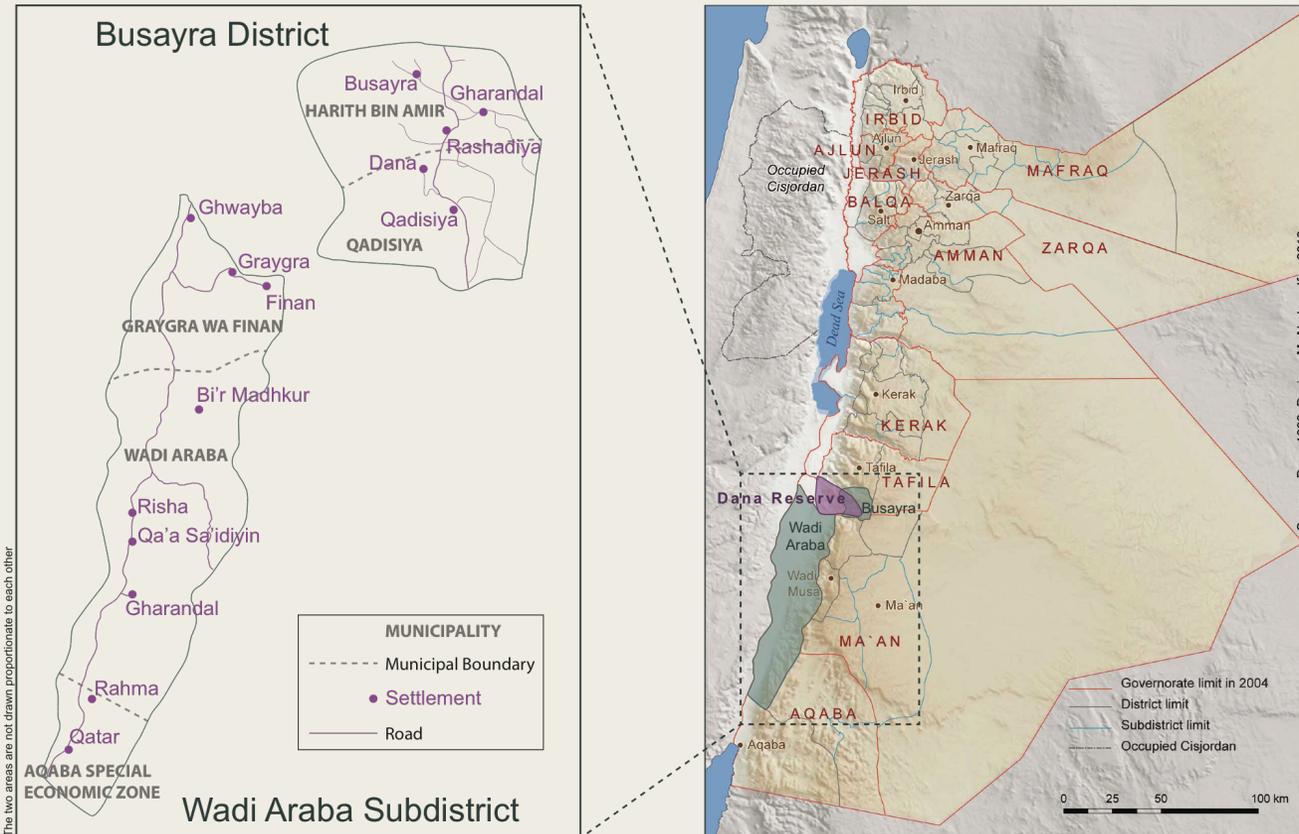
MCC – Mennonite Central Committee

Programme lines, e.g.

Poverty pockets

Integrated Conservation and Development

Map 1: Administrative divisions in Jordan with special focus on Busayra District and Wadi Araba Subdistrict



The two areas are not drawn proportionate to each other

Base Map: Ababsa (ed.) (2013): *Atlas of Jordan*, Institut français du Proche Orient (Figure V.10). Used with permission.  
Overlays and pop-out: Cameron Thibos

# Putting people in their place: exclusionary dynamics of poverty alleviation policy

- Poverty alleviation / local / community development / participation as catchwords, but variety of governmental projects
- Policies shaped by organisation goals, procedures and contexts (rather than policy goals)
- Exclusion of beneficiaries even if participation is nominally an objective
- Core dynamic: Re-production of spatial hierarchies of government → target populations as 'local' (vs. 'broader' logics and claims)
- Overrides distinctions between activating vs top-down, distributional forms of development

# Putting people in their place: exclusionary dynamics of poverty alleviation policy

## ■ Competition as a driving force



- Regulatory blurriness, and maintaining tight grip on information
- Following standard procedures
- The path of least resistance
- Preventing, dismissing and deflecting conflicts



# Putting people in their place: exclusionary dynamics of poverty alleviation policy

- Competition as a driving force
  
- **Regulatory blurriness, and maintaining tight grip on information**
  - *Wadi Araba between ASEZA, JVA and administrative independence*  
→ *who to turn to?*
  - *Limited intra-agency flow of information to local level*
  - *Lack of transparency (e.g. among Royal NGOs) towards local 'partners' about budgets, timeframes, project scopes*
  
- Following standard procedures
- The path of least resistance
- Preventing, dismissing and deflecting conflicts

# Putting people in their place: exclusionary dynamics of poverty alleviation policy

- Competition as a driving force
- Regulatory blurriness, and maintaining tight grip on information
- **Following standard procedures**
  - *Top-down: 'Scientific evidence' prioritised over inhabitants' concerns*
  - *Standardised participatory mapping / needs assessment omits crucial issues*
- The path of least resistance
- Preventing, dismissing and deflecting conflicts

# Putting people in their place: exclusionary dynamics of poverty alleviation policy

- Competition as a driving force
- Regulatory blurriness, and maintaining tight grip on information
- Following standard procedures
- **The path of least resistance**
  - *Working through intermediaries (e.g. Royal NGOs) rather than place-based organisations*
  - *Focus on most visible interventions, rather than most needed*
  - *Working with the strong rather than the most poor / marginalised*
- Preventing, dismissing and deflecting conflicts

# Putting people in their place: exclusionary dynamics of poverty alleviation policy

- Competition as a driving force
- Regulatory blurriness, and maintaining tight grip on information
- Following standard procedures
- The path of least resistance
- **Preventing, dismissing and deflecting conflicts**
  - *Abandoning unsuccessful projects*
  - *'Going it alone': working without local partners*
  - *Divide and rule: selective cooperation with some 'locals' , not others*
  - *Referring to superior interests (conservation, entrepreneurial mindset, etc.)*
  - *Culturalisation (e.g. low capacities)*

# Re-shaping policies through negotiations and compromises

- **Spaces for negotiation and compromise emerge through**
  - *Will to succeed of policy-shapers (local staff, on-site managers, implementers) necessitates compromises*
  - *Dynamics of emplacement (e.g. regulatory blurriness, Inexperience of staff of intervening agencies)*
  - *Participatory strategies*

# Re-shaping policies through negotiations and compromises

- **Local brokers as core figures in negotiation processes**

“We see the reconstruction project as a cake... we want to benefit from the cake, you benefit and I benefit and this one and that one. Eventually everyone has to benefit from it.”

“There is no just distribution of the collected funds”

“We need to organise independently to counter our marginalisation”

“We need to compete with each other in the tourism business”

(Head of cooperative, Sept 2011)

→ self-interest (rent-seeking?) and broader concerns not separate

→ residual and currently dominant frames used alongside each other

# Re-shaping policies through negotiations and compromises

- **Access to resources and jobs more important than specific approach**
  - Wages and employment as core yardstick for measuring project success, more important than project ownership or methodology
  - Demands for employment in return for consent to (self-help and other) projects
  - Negotiations about terms for / scope of inclusion into projects (e.g. no- of cooperatives)
  - Creative solutions (e.g. sub-contracting projects)
  - Appealing to agencies' own standards and priorities (e.g. participation, transparency, local partners) to achieve better terms:

“We hope that the Royal Society – as part of transparency and to demonstrate the effectiveness and credibility of the partnership with the local community – acquaints us with the documents of the restoration project and the agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Cooperation. Is it not our right as partners to be informed?”

*(Cooperative in Dana, 2009)*

# Concluding remarks

- Varied approaches but similar organisational goals and dynamics, which exclude local populations from meaningful role in poverty alleviation policies: emplacement
  - Local(ised) policy-shapers negotiate and challenge these dynamics → re-inscribe distributional and other logics into poverty alleviation strategies
  - Policies neither clearly ‘activating’ nor rentieristic / distribution oriented but composed of heterogeneous elements
  - Small benefits and victories keep local actors engaged in poverty alleviation strategies, but: continuity of emplacement and disempowerment
- Goal: countering emplacement and spatial marginalisation rather than empowerment and activation