



The Arab Families Working Group

## **Costs of coping with poverty in rural Egypt**

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### *Abstract*

This paper focuses on the impact of poverty on family in rural Egypt through focusing on a moment that witnessed abrupt impoverishment of almost one million families. This moment refers to the large scale evictions that followed the full implementation of the new tenancy law in 1997, resulting in the loss of the main source of livelihood and compounding the now chronic problem of rural poverty in Egypt. A question that was often asked by those who were aware of the extent of poverty-related problems, and who were concerned about the fate of rural-dwellers is: how are people coping? In response to this question, we usually turn to investigating “coping strategies” through looking at ways in which a population living under conditions of extreme economic distress is managing to survive. This is a reasonable response to a legitimate question, and “coping strategies” remains a useful way of guiding investigation into the realities of living with poverty. This contribution, however, intends to shift the focus from ways of coping to highlighting the costs of coping. This paper argues that strategies for coping with the immediate state of distress necessarily engender longer-term adverse conditions. At the social level, they hit at the most vulnerable social groups within an already distressed population. At another level, the paper examines the implications of coping for issues of resistance. As has been the case with “everyday forms of resistance”, good-intentioned excessive celebration of “strategies of survival” as signs of popular genius may be unwittingly contributing to the dissipating the potential for political action towards real change. The paper finally raises a general theoretical question concerning the meaning (or even possibility) of agency under conditions of extreme distress and great power disparity.

The paper is based on fieldwork that was conducted in a number of Upper Egyptian villages during the year following the evictions.