Unequal Agricultures

The gap in what one agricultural worker can produce with a year of labor has grown from about 1:10 since WWII to about 1:2000 today. Real grain prices have plummeted and billions of farmers have been forced off the land. Malnutrition, out-migration of peasants in poor countries, and low labor costs for manufacturing are some outcomes.

Contemporary Agricultural Revolution (the 1900s)

1. large scale motorization and mechanization
2. selection of high yield plants and animals
3. widespread use of fertilizers
4. pesticide and other agrochemical use

note: the post WWII Green Revolution similar to above, but without item #1 above

Case of Developed Countries (The Global North):

Best equipped and situated farmers in developed countries can produce about 2,000,000 kg/worker/yr. of grain or grain equivalent

These productivity gains exceeded those of industry and service

This has driven down real agricultural prices in 1950 to 2010 to 25 to 50 percent of former levels

Thus > 90 percent of farms couldn’t survive – they disappeared. The land is now worked by a small fraction of the people that worked it seven decades ago.

Case of Developing Countries (The Global South)

A few large, well-capitalized landowners have reached similar labor productivity to that of developed countries

Some smaller farmers, well positioned with good land and water resources, have employed Green Revolution technologies. They now produce:

* + w/ manual tools only ~10,000 kg/yr/worker of grain equivalent
  + with animal power produce ~50,000 kg/yr/worker of grain equivalent

But the poorest 300 million farmers and their dependents, with the least land (and/or of poorest quality) produce around 1,000 kg/yr/worker of grain equivalent. Post WWII, such a farmer received the equivalent of $50 in 2001 dollars for 100 kg. of grain. The farmer had to sell 200 kg in order to renew tools clothes, etc., retaining 800 kg. to feed four persons modestly. By 1990, the same farmer received no more the the equivalent of $20 in 2001 dollars for 100 kg. Thus the farmer had to sell 400 kg in order to renew tools and retained only 600 kg for food, this time insufficient for four persons. It was no longer possible to buy new tools. Finally, today, if this farmer receives no more than $10 for 100 kg of grain, more than 600kg must be sold in order to renew the equipment, which is impossible since one cannot feed four persons with 400 kg of grain. The farmer is condemned to indebtedness and an exodus toward slums or another country.

*Therefore, farm and food policies designed to provide cities and towns with food products at always lower prices, impoverish the most destitute peasants even more, and these farmers and their dependents, numbering over one billion, form the majority of the world’s undernourished people.*

This material was sourced from Mazoyer and Roudart (2005), A History of World Agriculture, New York: Monthly Review Press.