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During the 20th century, the availability of irrigation water became one of the essential conditions for the modernization of agriculture. The issue of ensuring the extraction and distribution of sufficient water to increase agricultural productivity has assumed increasing relevance for several national governments and international organizations. In order to achieve these objectives, these entities have become allies to promote the construction of extensive irrigation systems in areas of dry land. This concern about the different impact of irrigation on dry land agricultural productivity was most evident after World War II, when the "green revolution" model became hegemonic in the West, but it was already evident in the previous decades.

This chapter aims to analyze the issues associated with the transformation of dry land into irrigated land during the 20th century. Changes in pre-World War II discourses and practices are identified, relating them to the dominant modernization models in each period. The analysis is based on the research carried out in the regions of Alentejo (Portugal) and Rio Grande do Norte (Brazil). The research showed that, despite the differences that separate these regions, irrigation infrastructure programs in these semi-arid zones present several similarities, both in the objectives and in the implementation processes. This study allows us to discuss several dimensions of the impacts of rural development policies, inserting them in the broader debates on sustainability and globalization.