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# Rural governance in the Mediterranean: trends and new challenges

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## 1. Unstoppable trends

Globalisation and the opening up of markets will continue to influence modes of local governance, relations between the state and civil society and the administrative or economic institutional contexts in which public, associative and private players operate.

Throughout the Mediterranean Region (North, South or East), the ever more rapid globalisation and economic liberalisation processes, begun in the late seventies, continue to bring institutional and organisational changes, overturning ideas and practice in the field of economic regulation and public affairs management. The central role of the state has been called into question and attempts have been made to promote modes of governance that give a more prominent role in rural development to decentralised institutions and different kinds of professional, associative and community organisation. The modalities, pace, form and impact of recent changes have varied from one region to another.

In countries to the South of the Mediterranean, the shock of globalisation and economic adjustment has undermined the central government construction process, whose essential features were regional development (through improvement of basic infrastructure) and creation of a stable administrative elite, capable of managing public affairs.

Institutional reforms introduced in the countries to the North have led to greater convergence between European and national rural development policies. They have established a framework favourable to synergies between all rural development players and created conditions favourable to the establishment of contractual relations between state, local authorities and rural populations (planning contracts for each territory, sustainable agriculture contracts, development charters, etc.).

The processes of administrative deconcentration, decentralisation of public affairs management, and regionalisation as a political expression of rural populations' aspirations may be seen as aspects of another major, irreversible trend.

Rural populations and local authorities will pursue the task of establishing appropriate frameworks for action and cooperation with a view to playing a more effective part in the development of their territories.

Deconcentration, decentralisation and regionalisation provide the institutional and organisational context for the restructuring of existing relations between the rural world and society as a whole. This restructuring is the result of the new economic, social and environmental functions assigned to rural areas and the increasing assertiveness of local bodies. However, these trends develop in different ways and at different rates, depending on the historical trajectory, heritage or geographical context of the country concerned.

The historical heritage of states, the history of civil societies and political systems, as well as geographical setting are factors that must be taken into consideration. The historical development of the different roles of the state and the local rural communities is clearly crucial.

The historic process of state construction and modernisation is underway in a number of countries to the South: factors linked to the colonial legacy (in the Maghreb), political conflict (in Cyprus, Lebanon and Israel), political instability or vulnerability (in Lebanon, Palestinian Authority), together with radical historical and political upheavals (in Albania) will continue to exert a strong influence on the way rural institutions and organisations develop.

The history of political systems and regimes in countries to the North of the Mediterranean (Greece, Spain and Portugal) illustrates the decisive impact of the institutional and political reforms driven by the EU (regionalisation in Spain, administrative reform in Greece, reallocation of national and regional responsibilities in Portugal). The transition to forms of governance giving more power to local players has led to the gradual eradication of institutions left over from the dictatorships. In the South and East of the Mediterranean (in Turkey, Egypt and the Maghreb, for example), the legacy of centralisation and authoritarian political systems will continue to influence the way local players organise and behave.<sup>1</sup>

In these southern and eastern countries, failure to implement deconcentration or decentralisation policies, lack of coordination between different authorities and rigidity of administrative rules will continue to curb the public-private-associative dynamic for a long time to come.

Geographical setting and physical features are crucial factors for progress in the development of new modes of rural governance (in the Maghreb, Albania, Spain or Greece). Demographic and economic decline in mountainous regions and isolated rural communes, and unequal provision of goods and services due to lack of innovative projects will hinder responsible, civic participation by local players.

In countries to the South, physically disadvantaged, landlocked regions will not succeed in overcoming their present institutional and organisational deficiencies, given the polarisation of administrative structures and public services and the concentration of the latter in areas with high growth and high production potential. The institutional shortcomings of the poorest disadvantaged areas stem from the inadequacy of communications and transport infrastructure, lack of interdependence, compartmentalisation of branches and regions, segmentation of circuits, asymmetrical relations and the lack of a galvanising environment.

In countries to the North of the Mediterranean, local political arrangements have already been revitalised and participation of local players in regional development is well established. The southern countries, however, are still engaged in the process of developing civil society, which is attempting to free itself from the old social and cultural structures.

State construction and growing trade relations will continue to exert a lasting influence on traditional rural communities. In countries to the South of the Mediterranean, the old tribal units will continue to die out under the pressure of state intervention and market forces. The state and the market will also play complementary roles in bringing about the decline of traditional organisations and the development of agricultural market enterprises. The rural communities produce a class of powerful individuals, whose interests lie outside their region and who regard traditional rules as no more than a brake on their development. The rise of civil society is a long, complex process, which ultimately depends on the extent to which market relations are developed in rural areas. But it does not follow that civil society will be total freed from ties based on regional, family, tribal or religious identity (in Lebanon, Albania, Egypt and the Maghreb), which bind the different rural communities together.

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<sup>1</sup> A report by the UNPD (2003) highlighted the role of historical, psychological and cultural factors in citizens' participation in social life. In Egypt the subordination of society to the state dates back to the time of the pharaohs and the hydraulic societies, when states had to be powerful and centralised.

## 2. The weight of national and international policies

Mediterranean rural development policies are the result of a historical development process specific to local rural societies. Government interventions, or more precisely the implementation of national agricultural policies, have played a decisive role in the process of developing these policies.

To the North of the Mediterranean, rural development policies are largely the result of agricultural modernisation strategies, regional policies and environmental policies. They set out to achieve social cohesion, revitalisation of land areas and regional development. To the South, these policies are mainly shaped by the desire to improve living conditions and combat poverty. In all countries, however, sustainable development of natural resources and involvement of local players in the exploitation of local resources are essential parts of the general strategy on rural development.

Sustainable agricultural and rural development strategies and policies all point to the fundamental principle that local governance should be exercised by strong, rural organisations, which are representative of agricultural and rural populations and are genuinely involved in rural development projects. Decentralisation, the organisation of producers and other members of civil society and the establishment of local, bottom-up procedures represent the way forward and provide the basis for sound rural governance.

Over the past twenty years, the institutional landscape of the Mediterranean countries has undergone significant change, due notably to the disengagement of the state (in the South) and reforms to support the process of regionalisation and administrative decentralisation (in France, Italy and Spain). There can be no doubt that organisations come into being whenever favourable conditions are created by public policies; moreover many organisations exist solely as a result of the institutional stimulus applied at a given moment. The promotion of a new conception of rural development has accordingly been accompanied by the rise of corresponding institutions and organisations, and this development has in turn given rise to rural development secretariats in Algeria and Morocco, local development agencies in Greece, a Ministry of Local Development in Egypt, rural development institutions in Albania, and other new bodies.

Political moves to liberalise public affairs will also provide a legal framework favourable to freedom of association in many countries to the South and East of the Mediterranean, indeed political liberalisation was crucial to the development of rural organisations in Albania, Turkey, Morocco and Algeria. While it must be recognised that the organisational renewal of the rural world is the effect of an institutional stimulus, it should also be pointed out that some new agricultural and rural organisations have emerged without any such stimulus. These different organisations may be the product of sectoral initiatives (water management, agricultural producers, etc.) and broader initiatives (local development). Their rise is linked to the proliferation of collective initiatives in the rural environment.

European community policies, for their part, have a twofold effect. They encourage the rise of new associations and also help create a climate in which relations between players can more easily develop. They have prompted the creation of networks, in which different ways of thinking complement each other in joint development schemes. Community programmes, particularly the Leader programmes (linking up rural development projects), appear to have increased participation by local players and improved their organisation. Most associations now realise that they can only develop their activities or contribute to the development of their area if they are prepared to collaborate and enter inter partnership with other local players. While partnerships often mean no more than an exchange of information or money, there is a growing sense that they should be based on commonly agreed goals, tasks and responsibilities. Such partnerships represent a shift towards joint administration of local rural development programmes, encouraging the development of a “projects” culture (the focus being on the project itself rather than the financial return).

These developments are often prompted by the provision of aid by one or more international institution: the funding of large-scale rural development projects in Turkey, Albania or Lebanon has been accompanied by the establishment of producers’ organisations. It should also be noted that the governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf countries give generous support to Islamic fundamentalist movements, associations and NGOs operating in Egypt.

The Barcelona Conference has given a new impetus to developments in the Euro-Mediterranean area. The needs and demands of civil society were voiced in a number of civil forums in the margins of the official conference and the final document, signed by all 27 governments, formally recognised the role of civil society, emphasising that its participation was essential to the fulfilment of the goals and objectives upon which the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership area depended. The idea was to go beyond mere economic arrangements and create a partnership between civil societies. The same principles were invoked in the association agreements between the MTCs and the European Union. Partnership with foreign institutions and NGOs is regarded as one of the main achievements of rural associations in the countries to the South. Partnership with a foreign association, quite apart from the material advantage it brings, has often enabled the associations to convey a credible image and to exploit this image in negotiations with state institutions, rural communes and provincial authorities.

### **3. Challenges and emerging developments**

The preceding analyses highlight a number of challenges:

#### ***Legal and institutional challenges***

To the North of the Mediterranean, the European Union, the states, the regions and the departments have pursued various planning and development policies for rural areas and these policies are now reflected in a wide range of procedures. The result is a rather more complex situation and a proliferation of institutions, which militates against coordinated, cohesive action by different players in the development process. "Institutional encumbrance", "proliferation of measures" and juxtaposition of areas of operation (intercommunal areas, Leader areas, countries, parks, etc.) serve to hinder innovative steps and initiatives and have all been denounced by the associations.

In the countries to the South and East of the Mediterranean, the dividing line between the state and the organisations of civil society is poorly defined in legal texts. Statutes that have been introduced place professional agricultural organisations (PAOs) under the administrative supervision and/or authority of local authorities, thereby restricting their autonomy and operational capability. Moreover, the PAOs are not invited to participate, as equal partners, in the preparation of development programmes. Exchanges tend to be conducted vertically since horizontal or local relations with other players are still at the embryonic stage. In the rare cases where these relations have been formalised, they have run up against problems and have not been entirely effective. Where regional authorities exist, responsibilities are rather badly distributed between them and the state. Some states in the South are subject to a twofold constraint: they are required (1) to drive the process of decentralisation and (2) to attend to the more urgent matter of *providing administrative cover across their territory*, particularly in isolated rural areas, which often lack the public services found in urban areas. It is necessary to eliminate, or at least reduce, inequalities in access to basic services.

#### ***Material and human challenges***

Generally speaking, all types of agricultural and rural organisation are faced with the problem of inadequate human, material or financial resources, which limits their ability to foster agricultural and rural development. The local or national institutional framework has failed to ease financial pressure, which continues to be the most serious constraint. The associations must constantly renew their efforts to avoid financial collapse, which would force them to close. The rural organisations' heavy financial dependence on central bodies and government budgets affects the level at which they can operate and/or their areas of activity and ultimately determines their viability and durability.

More particularly, lack of training and knowledge among grassroots players limits the organisations' ability to call upon appropriate levels of expertise, qualified personnel being essential for their effective operation and even survival. Lack of members with qualifications and training affects the way collective and individual responsibility is exercised in existing rural associations.

### ***Economic and social challenges***

Populations need to be provided with goods and services in order to counter rural-urban drift in the North and combat poverty in the South of the Mediterranean Region. The availability of market and non-market goods and services, together with new jobs and activities, would prevent women and young people from leaving the area and enable local communities to welcome new populations and maintain a rural environment that was not dependent on the urban world.

Rural organisations are a manifestation of the attempt by civil society to become actively involved in local development through contributions in areas as diverse as new technology, the environment, job creation, empowerment of women and cultural heritage.

### ***Emerging processes: breaking with custom***

Rural regions are seeing the rise of a new elite. It is made up of young graduates from rural areas and urban citizens and officials who have returned to the rural world, bringing their knowledge and their social or physical capital to the aid of their rural commune, region or district. The Leader programmes in Europe have helped redistribute competencies and human resources. The impetus given to bottom-up arrangements in the South has encouraged initiatives – some of them economically opportunist – by local players and citizens. The new rural organisations serve as a training ground for the new political elites and they also encourage local democracy and safeguard rural identity. At the present stage in the development of rural organisations in the Mediterranean Region, local communities are endeavouring to take full advantage of the local associative network.

Two trends seem to be emerging: some local authorities see associational life as a factor in improving the performance of the local community, while others are more inclined to see it as part the process of learning about local democracy. In some countries to the South and East of the Mediterranean (Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco and Turkey, for example), urban and rural organisations are drawn into political conflicts and use religion as a way of organising their members and strengthening social ties. Traditional organisations give way to the new elites, which are the product of national education systems.

The change in relations between the state and civil society, the transfer of responsibilities and powers to local authorities marks the beginning of the era of local-level experts. If operations in the rural communes are to be effective, it will be necessary to develop a “projects” culture as well as the skills needed to manage project work (in terms of identifying tasks, performing them and assessing them) and to take charge of administrative and financial procedures. The competitiveness of rural communes and territories will depend on their ability to innovate, adapt to an increasingly complex environment and assimilate new technologies.

Some rural organisations set out to be a part of the territorial development dynamic. Their organisational energy often stems from the desire to assert a new territorial identity. This is particularly true of organisations that support community programmes (as in France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal) or local development organisations that set up with a view to acting in the public interest and contributing to the process of change and local development.

These organisations form themselves into networks, either on a formal basis (partnership) or an informal one (contacts between associations). These fairly large rural organisations, found to the North and to the South of the Mediterranean, are very useful partners for other development players. Many of them attempt to remain independent of government officials, who are inclined (given the political competition they face from them) to use them as their own agents or to exert political control over them. Lastly it must be emphasised that these citizens’ organisations are a breeding ground for the new political elite and/or candidates for local, regional or national elections.

Rural life needs to be defended and heritage, capital and local values must be safeguarded. Rural regions are found to have unique resources, goods and services in the form of their landscape and their historical, architectural, religious and cultural heritage. They are able to deploy all of these assets to assert their differences and peculiarities in face of the standardisation of culture. Many Mediterranean countries shows strong signs of doing just that and this trend will bear valuable fruit if it is properly managed in the future.