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Agriculture : a strategic sector in the Mediterranean area

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As international geopolitics grow more complex and new forms of socio-economic equilibrium take shape, the Mediterranean Region is once more giving cause for concern and demanding our attention. Ten years after the resounding Barcelona Declaration, establishing the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), doubt now prevails over confidence and hope. The Mediterranean Region is still a place of tensions, beset with security problems, socio-political division and unequal distribution of wealth. In 2005, France, Italy and Spain alone accounted for 80% of its total GDP.

The problems facing Euro-Mediterranean cooperation can be put down to a great many factors. One such is that insufficient account has been taken of certain strategic sectors. Agriculture is one area to which scant attention has been paid within the Euro-Mediterranean context and yet it occupies an essential and strategic place therein: essential because it is fundamental to the maintenance of economic, social and territorial equilibrium in the Mediterranean Region; strategic because important political and trade issues and the resolve to build a more cohesive Mediterranean Region depend upon the ways in which it develop and is dealt with.

In November 2005, the European Union (EU) decided to begin negotiations with Mediterranean Partners Countries² (MPCs) on the liberalisation of agricultural trade. This decision, an important one when all is said and done, nevertheless involves issues and risks that need to be properly managed.

If we can understand why agriculture is such a strategic factor in the Mediterranean Region and see just how the outlook for the liberalisation of agricultural trade is currently changing, we should be able to give some account of the future of the Mediterranean. Such is the modest ambition of this paper: to put forward reference points for the discussion, alert readers to future developments and put out a call for action.

¹ This analytic paper is the document presented by the General Secretary on the 6th meeting of the CIHEAM member countries' Ministers of Agriculture in Cairo (Egypt), the 2d December 2006.

² At present the partnership comprises 35 member states: the 25 states of the European Union and 10 Mediterranean Partner Countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority).

1. An exploratory review of Mediterranean Agriculture

This first part³ is not intended to give an exhaustive account of the agricultural situation in the Mediterranean Region but simply to alert the reader to unstoppable trends, emerging challenges and food security issues in the region.

Unstoppable trends

The Mediterranean region is an area without borders, an open territory, whose limits had long been traceable only from the presence of olive groves. Three main features epitomise the area's specific character: the peculiar nature of its climate and vegetation, the richness of its biodiversity and landscapes and at the same time the fragility of the land and its vulnerability to environmental factors (drought, hydric erosion, floods, salinisation, rugged mountains, etc.).

Another distinctive feature of the Mediterranean Region is the importance role of agriculture in the socio-territorial balance of the states that make it up. This is particularly evident in the large size of the rural population: at present, 36% of the 454 million inhabitants of the region⁴ live in a rural environment. The figure is as high as 41% on the Southern shore, where rural populations in some countries (notably Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Palestinian Territories) are still rising, unlike those of the northern shore. This means that in 2020 a third of the Mediterranean population will still be living in the country, 48 million of them on the southern shore. However, the scale of the urban explosion is such that rural populations throughout the Region are declining in comparison with the urban ones. In this respect they are thus following the lead of the Maghreb, where two thirds of the population are now concentrated in cities compared with just half in 1990.

At the same time the number of agricultural workers remains high, with nearly 39 million people in the Mediterranean Region working in Agriculture (20% of the region's workforce or one member of the Mediterranean population in eleven). To the South of the Basin, there are 34 million people in the agricultural sector (compared with 30 million in 1990), or 25 to 30% of the active population. There are nevertheless stark contrasts between countries (43% in Turkey and 33% in Morocco as opposed to 5% in Libya and 3% in Lebanon) and it should also be underlined that Turkey and Egypt alone account for 23 million of the agricultural workers. On the Northern shore, on the other hand, we have witnessed a spectacular fall in the number of people employed in agriculture over the past three decades (the number of agricultural workers is currently 4 million - 5.5% of the active population).

Moreover, agriculture makes a considerable contribution to the national economies of the Mediterranean countries. The share of agriculture in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is admittedly very low in the Northern countries (2 to 3% on average) with the exception of Albania (25%). But in the South, economic growth often depends upon the dynamism of the agricultural sector. Agriculture there is vital to the economies and currently accounts for 10 to 15% of GDP (23% in Syria and 17% in Morocco). By the same token, agri-food products account for a significant proportion of Mediterranean trade. Agricultural products still account for 5 to 10% of total imports in the Northern countries (19% in Albania) and 10 to 20% in the Southern countries (23% in Algeria). Agricultural exports (15 to 25% of total exports) are also of strategic importance to the national economies of many countries (Greece, Lebanon, Cyprus, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories and, to a lesser extent, France, Spain, Morocco and Egypt).

Food, for its part, is a key Mediterranean asset on account of its quality and diversity. The diet is modest (2500 to 3000 calories per inhabitant per jour) with a special place allotted to certain products (fruit, vegetables, olive oil, spices and meat), and meals are organised in a formal manner and eaten in convivial surroundings. Moreover this consumption model is praised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for its nutritional and organoleptic qualities. It must also be borne in mind that the average share of the household budget allocated to food is 15% to the North of the Mediterranean and 30 to 40% to the South. Diet therefore has an essential role in promoting a Mediterranean identity.

³ The data given in this article is derived from various works produced by CIHEAM, including the work currently being carried out by the forward planning group charged with preparing the *Mediterra 2008* annual report.

⁴ Information given in this article relates to 19 countries in the Mediterranean Basin: 8 countries on the northern shore (Albania, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta Portugal and Spain,) and 11 countries on the southern shore (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority). The population projections are based on analyses by the United Nations Organisation, presented in "World population prospects: The 2004 revision population database".

Emerging challenges

The first major challenge concerns the rural development policies being implemented in the Mediterranean countries. To the North of the Basin, we are currently faced with the challenge of maintaining the rural renaissance observed over the past fifteen years, which was prompted by the new directions stipulated under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy and its radical reform in 1992. Awareness of the multi-functional nature of agriculture has led to a recognition of the range of services provided by the farmer or producer: guaranteeing food safety, maintaining the environment, contributing to the regional planning process and stimulating employment in the rural environment like any other economic operator. This renewal of the countryside is reflected in the increased attractiveness of rural environments, the diversification of the rural economy, the rise of agritourism, not to mention the influx of new country dwellers, who leave the city at the weekend for greener, more natural surroundings. Moreover, a new demand is growing up in society, stimulated by the quality of the life and the products offered by the countryside, which is giving the rural world a whole new function.

To the South of the Basin, the challenge is quite different: the focus is on the fight against poverty and the backwardness of rural areas. Typical of the latter is the lack of access to collective infrastructure (water, electricity, healthcare, etc.), underemployment and illiteracy. Notwithstanding the introduction of rural development policies⁵, the facts and figures speak for themselves: two thirds of the poor in the Maghreb live in rural areas; more and more farmers are having to supplement their agricultural work with an uncertain job in the city (building site, factory, etc.); and many country dwellers are only able to survive because a member of their family, who has emigrated to another country or moved to the capital, sends them money. The poverty index value in rural areas is always much higher than in urban ones: in Algeria the respective values are 17% and 7% and in Morocco they are 27% and 12%. Gender discrimination and the autonomy of women in rural areas are further issues of great concern (the share of agriculture in female employment as a whole is still 57% in Morocco and Turkey).

The Mediterranean is faced with a second challenge of managing the dual process of urbanisation and coastal development, which is proceeding far more rapidly there than anywhere else in the world. Around the Mediterranean rim, the number of cities with populations over a million is increasing (thirty today compared with ten in 1950), the coastline is being built upon at an ever increasing rate (half the coast line could be affected by 2025) and pressure on the coastline is all the more marked as the number of tourists increases (at present the region accounts for a third of the international tourism flow). This urbanisation-coastal development process is more marked to the South of the Mediterranean, where the cities are expected to show a population increase of 98% over the period 1990-2020, compared with 17% to the North. There is no question that this process is having a destabilising effect on territorial equilibrium, as it tends to create irreversible gulfs between the coastal areas and the hinterlands, while exposing the cities to chaos in terms of living space, sanitary conditions, ecology and social relations.

This brings us to the third major challenge: the choice of the ecological model underpinning public strategies and policies in the Mediterranean Region. An urgent response is needed to the environmental challenge presented by the sacrifice of agricultural land to the ongoing process of urbanisation, which overexploits resources and devastates regional biodiversity. Needless to say, water is at the heart of the issue⁶, given that half the people suffering from water shortage worldwide are concentrated in the Mediterranean Region. The number of those without access to an adequate water supply (ie less than 500 m³ per year) could rise to 63 million by 2025. Not only are water resources in short supply, they are also very unevenly distributed across the Region, with countries on the southern shore having only 13%, while Turkey has 20% and the northern shore has 67%.

⁵ These rural development policies normally have four components: improving living conditions, diversifying activity to stimulate employment, protecting natural resources and training local players in the management and implementation of these policies.

⁶ These figures are taken from the report *"Méditerranée, les perspectives du Plan Bleu sur l'environnement et le développement"*, Editions de l'Aube, Octobre 2005, under the direction of Guillaume Benoit and Aline Comeau (chapter on water pp. 72-107).

In most countries (but not France or the Balkans) agriculture is still the main consumer of water, used for irrigation. This “green water” accounts for nearly 65% of total demand for water in the Mediterranean Basin although the proportion varies considerably from one shore to the other (48% in the North and 82% in the South). Given its rarity, water is expected to present the first obstacle to the production of a sufficient quantity of food, since a shortage would lead to a fall in agricultural output. Water would inevitably be a root cause of the political and socio-economic tensions that are so difficult to resolve. This is why agriculture, rural development and sustainability are now more closely linked in the Mediterranean Region than ever before.

To complete this review of the main challenges now facing agriculture in the Mediterranean Region, we should mention the rapid growth in malnutrition. Food consumption patterns are changing in many Mediterranean countries, particularly those of the Maghreb, where they are mimicking those of the West, and more precisely those of North America. While food security in terms of quantity is by and large being maintained to the South of the Mediterranean, we are witnessing greater insecurity in terms of quality. Like the urbanisation of society and the increased presence of women in the labour market, the advent of major distribution channels (with the establishment of hypermarkets on the edges of large cities) is destroying some of the old traditions. New dietary habits are reflected in the increasing number of young people who are overweight or obese (in the Maghreb, obesity now affects 17% of children under five compared with 7% in 1995.)

Agricultural trade between Mediterranean Partner Countries

Comparatively speaking, the Mediterranean Region has been spared by the problem of under-nutrition, but food security nevertheless remains very uncertain. For nearly half a century, we have witnessed a decline in the agricultural trade balance of several Mediterranean countries, particularly those in the South. The uncertainty is due both to insufficient agricultural output and, more important, to the scale of the population explosion in these countries.

A review of demographic trends in the Region reveals considerable contrasts, the extent of which are not always adequately measured. Between 1970 and 2000 the population to the South of the Mediterranean doubled, while on the northern shore there was concern over falling population levels (particularly in Italy). The southern Mediterranean Region is admittedly undergoing rapid demographic change at the moment (particularly in the Maghreb countries), but it is less marked than in Latin America or South-East Asia. This means that the countries on the southern shore will be engulfed by the arrival of large numbers of young people in the labour market. A genuine generational imbalance is therefore emerging in the Mediterranean Region, where the under-twenties currently represent 45% of the population of the South but only 22% of the North. As a result of the population explosion, the demand for food products in the southern countries will eventually increase, with supply being either limited (meat) or, as now, insufficient (cereals, meat and sugar).

At present, Euro-Mediterranean trade is highly asymmetrical: the EU's trade with the MPCs accounts for only 2% of its agricultural imports and exports, whereas the MPC's trade is heavily focused on the EU (the latter receives 51% of their agricultural exports and provides 33% of their imports). The agricultural trading position of the southern countries seems increasingly vulnerable. Their agricultural trade balance has been negative for thirty years and continues to deteriorate (the 2004 trade deficit with the rest of the world amounted to nearly \$9,950 billion. We forget all too often that the balance of trade with the EU gives just as much cause for concern. Euro-Mediterranean agricultural trade on the whole is balanced: the volume of imports by the EU from the MPCs was worth \$6.5 billion in 2004, while the value of European exports to the MPCs was \$5.9 billion, giving the MPCs a surplus of \$600 million. But this result hides another more significant one, for if we take Turkey out of the equation, the MPCs have a trade deficit of \$1,500 million dollars. The fact is that Ankara currently accounts for nearly half the MPCs' agricultural exports both to the EU and to the rest of the world.

It is true that food security in these countries has on the whole improved in quantitative terms, but at the cost of greater internal disparity (urban/rural division) and greater dependence on others for supply. If we examine the rate of food coverage in the Maghreb between 1970 and 2000, we find that it fell by three quarters, from 116% to 23%. The place of cereals in this situation should be underlined: while the MPCs represent 4% of the world population, they accounted for 12% of the world's cereal imports in 2003.

2. The debate on agriculture within the Euro-Mediterranean partnership

Here we offer an analysis of Euro-Mediterranean agricultural issues, breaking them down into simple terms and showing factors that lead to blockage, together with recent signs that trade is opening up.

A disappointing result

In the process of Euro-Mediterranean trade liberalisation, epitomised by the establishment of association agreements, the agricultural sector continues to be sacrificed. While preparations have been made for free trade in industrial goods, the liberalisation of agriculture is still a delicate matter, despite the importance of agriculture for the region. In the North, EU producers are afraid of having to confront greater competition with the disappearance of Community preference, while in the South, exporters are demanding wider access to the EU market. Part of the Euro-Mediterranean trade conflict arises from the risk of increased competition between the two shores over the same agricultural products (olive oil, fruit and vegetables). Agriculture has always been subject to controlled treatment within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and during the first decade of the EMP's existence, the idea of the "agricultural exception" clearly played a decisive role in the negotiation of the association agreements.

Generally speaking the MPCs are major importers of the EU's basic products, such as cereals sugar and milk. But in view of their poor performance in growing food crops, these states are disinclined to expose them to competition from abroad. Moreover, apart from its economic and social impact, such liberalisation would have important implications for food security policy. The MPCs have also held back in the negotiations on agricultural goods therefore, as the liberalisation process might have threatened some aspects of their internal equilibrium. It is also important to stress that there is intense competition between Mediterranean countries in agricultural trade. Four major rivalries can be distinguished: between the northern shore and the southern shore for certain products; between Mediterranean countries that are EU members, which often sell the same products to the rest of Europe; between farmers in the South, who are attempting to sell their products to the European market; and lastly between the world's major agricultural producers (the United States, Canada, Australia and Argentina, who provide nearly half the agricultural imports to the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

One last very sensitive point needs to be borne in mind, namely the two-tier nature of the agricultural sector to the South of the Mediterranean. Alongside the limited number of agrifood industries that have been drawn into the globalisation process and are performing very well, there are innumerable very small family farms, which are spread all over the rural environment and produce mainly for their own consumption. While the former may flourish under the Euro-Mediterranean economic integration scenario, the latter will inevitably be placed in a highly vulnerable position by the opening up of markets and the planned liberalisation of agricultural trade, being wholly unequipped to cope with the ensuing competition.

From Venice to Barcelona: signs that trade is opening up

As far as the agricultural sector is concerned, the merits of treating agriculture as an exception have therefore prevailed over those of the proposed liberalisation, even though the situation seems to have been changing recently. While the subject is still a controversial one, it has not only been revived but has actually been placed on the Euro-Mediterranean work programme. Discussion now focuses mainly on the pace and methodology of the process. Moreover, it has become apparent to decision-makers that agricultural matters can only be dealt with case by case, depending on the "sensitivity" of the product in the EU markets and the competitiveness of each MPC in the export market.

Accordingly, when the new European neighbourhood policy (ENP) was proposed by the Commission in march 2003 (its implementation being planned for 2007), the Euro-Mediterranean agricultural environment was found to have changed. It was necessary to wait until 27 November 2003 for the first Euro-Mediterranean agricultural conference to be organised in Venice, under an Italian presidency. The main recommendations had to do with extending rural development, promoting the quality of agricultural products and launching practical initiatives in the field of organic agriculture. Thanks to the good results achieved by the Venice conference, a more pragmatic, more constructive review of Euro-Mediterranean agriculture was initiated in the run up to the 10th anniversary of the EMP.

In 2005, named “Year of the Mediterranean” by the European forums, agriculture was an essential part of the programme set up to reform and relaunch the EMP. It is true that the EU had officially announced its decision to open agricultural relations with the MPCs in a letter dated 15 November 2005, stipulating that negotiations would take place from 2006 to provide for “steady liberalisation of trade in agricultural and fisheries products, both fresh and processed”. This decision was taken up in the five-year work programme adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean summit of heads of state and government on 28 November 2005 in Barcelona. From then on a committee of experts was charged to pursue the question with a view to drawing up a Euro-Mediterranean “road map for agriculture” in 2006.

The EU negotiations with the MPCs were therefore launched, on a bilateral basis in order to take account of the specific features of agriculture in the country in question and to comply with the new provisions of the ENP. Moreover it was planned that this road map would enter into force in 2007. It was to be based on a number of strategic directions: reciprocal liberalisation (the effort should be shared by the two shores), a progressive, gradual approach, two-speed implementation (the EU would have to accept that the MPC would take longer to open up their trade) and the drawing up of a list of exceptions for each country, showing the most sensitive products, which were not to be included in the liberalisation process. Moreover, under the terms of the road map, particular attention was to be paid to themes related to rural development, promotion of quality products, development of typical Mediterranean products, increased private investment in the agricultural sector and improved access to export markets.

The issues surrounding the liberalisation of agriculture in the Mediterranean context have clearly undergone significant change over the past three years. The opening up of trade should not however eclipse the many questions and concerns raised by the scenario.

The likely impacts of total agricultural liberalisation

At the World Trade Organisation’s multilateral trade negotiations, the paradox highlighted by most MPCs is that the rich countries, and therefore the EU countries, continue to support and protect their agriculture, whereas the poorer countries, and therefore some of the states in the South of the Mediterranean Basin⁷, have undertaken to reduce government support and to liberalise trade in agricultural goods. Leaving aside this area of confusion, uncertainty over the liberalisation of Euro-Mediterranean agricultural trade remains with regard to the feasibility of implementing such a process by 2010 and also to the sustainability of this free-trade zone, where economic imbalance always prevails over convergence.

As to the EU as a whole, the consequences would probably be limited, given the comparative insignificance of the MPCs in its external agricultural trade. The opening up of markets might on the other hand stimulate European exports to the southern shore of the Mediterranean, where there is a considerable and growing need for the basic products that Europe markets quite well (cereals, milk and meat). However, southern Europe taken in isolation would be seriously affected by sudden agricultural liberalisation: producers in the traditional sectors (fruit and vegetables), who are very widespread in Spain, the South of France, Italy and Greece, could well be damaged by the opening up of trade and will probably be set to oppose the policy if community protectionism is removed with no provision for transitional flanking measures.

For the MCPs, the impact would be far more serious: the repercussion of liberalisation would go far beyond agriculture, bringing socio-economic and political changes to peasant societies ill equipped to deal with the opening up of markets. The probable fall in prices might increase domestic consumption but would probably destabilise producers of food crops and small farmers. Trade rarely works to the benefit of the poorest. Moreover, the impoverishment of the farming population would have a whole series of effects, beginning with an explosion in unemployment and rural-urban drift. While the two-tier agriculture to the South of the Mediterranean promises large farmers and a few agribusinesses the opportunity to increase their exports to the EU (fruit, vegetables and fish products), we should be prepared to address the negative impact of opening up the Euro-Mediterranean markets on its small farmers. Moreover, analyses show that the traditional comparative advantages of the MPCs have been wearing away for some years as a result of demographic change: the rise in the population inevitably increases domestic food demand and thereby restricts the countries’ export potential.

⁷ At present the following MPCs are members of the WTO: Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey. Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority have observer status. Algeria is likely to become a member.

Other potentially harmful effects have been identified in the event of full implementation of the EMFTZ: greater vulnerability of poor households to fluctuations in the price of basic foods in the international markets, a diminished status and standard of living for women in rural areas, and greater pressure on the environment resulting from the decline in agricultural work and the mushrooming of the cities. Lastly, it is necessary to underscore the risks inherent in moving from a traditional type of agriculture aimed at the domestic market to a commercial type looking to the outside world at a time when food security in the countries to the South of the Mediterranean seems more uncertain than ever. It cannot be ecologically sound to force farmers to grow crops that may not be suited to local soils and resources in areas where water and arable land is already becoming dangerously scarce, just because they are not held back by trade barriers.

Of course, the liberalisation of Euro-Mediterranean agricultural trade is subject to other factors, which interact with these issues, beginning with the current reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Doha round of the WTO negotiations, the rise of Brazil and India on the world agrotrade scene, and not forgetting the United States strategy in the region, which is well illustrated by the free-trade agreement signed with Morocco in 2004.

3 Considering different prospects in the Mediterranean Region

In the light of the previous considerations and the many issues identified, attempts at forward planning may prompt us to sketch out three contrasting scenarios. The latter are not so much predictions as possible futures, which should lead us to reflect upon short- and medium-term developments in the Mediterranean Region.

The trend scenario

It is the direct outcome of current directions: a Mediterranean Region situated at the centre of international geopolitical disorder and still beset by numerous inequalities. At the same time, the Region is subject to distortions brought about by the globalisation of trade and it misses the pathway to growth and development, which globalisation theoretically provides.

As a result, Euro-Mediterranean relations stagnate. The map tends to show a multi-speed Mediterranean Region, where the only parts that matter are the useful globalised areas, ie the cities, the coastal areas and the tourist destinations. The rural areas of the South are not taken into account as they deserve to be. These areas gradually lose their vitality because they are excluded and abandoned. The farming population is of course weakened by the steady opening up of markets. The local people are impoverished and have no other choice but to migrate to the cities or to foreign countries. And what if this useful, globalised Mediterranean Region had no further use for its countryside and its peasants ?

The ruptures scenario

The second possible future: a ruptures scenario, in which the features referred to above are aggravated and the Mediterranean Region is even more divided. Instead of resolving themselves, traditional divisions widen. Certain phenomena grow more critical: overexploitation of natural resources, spread of poverty, increase in unemployment or economic sclerosis. Conflicts persist or intensify. One of the most striking aspects of the situation in the South is the final severing of links between the urban and rural worlds. The hinterland is cut off from society, excluded from economic growth, abandoned by the public authorities and so doomed to poverty and isolation. With the onset of liberalisation, peasant communities disappear, swelling the numbers of migrants headed for shanty towns or a desperate exile further to the North of the Region.

Demographic growth and low agricultural productivity increases the risk of breakdown in the food supply and of social crisis. In addition to this agricultural discord, there is the threat of conflict over water, which is more coveted than ever. Political insurgency and the rise of fundamentalism cannot be ruled out in such a context. As a result, Euro-Mediterranean cooperation flounders. The Mediterranean Region, while being steadily wiped off the geo-economic landscape, sends out an echo of all the major ills afflicting the planet, exhibiting inequalities, divisions and radical movements in abundance

The alliance and convergence scenario

The scenario merely consists in establishing a more promising future for the Mediterranean and is subject to certain conditions. First, we need to strengthen the partnership aspect of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, which should be more visible and play a more concrete role in the development process in countries in the South, while allowing Europe to continue to act as a separate entity on the international economic and geopolitical scene. Second, we need to make a consistent, determined choice about strategic priorities in the Mediterranean Region, where we all face the same challenges and where opportunities for mutual development really exist.

From this standpoint, agriculture may bring people together in effective projects designed to stimulate Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, employing bold strategies and complementary arrangements, and taking account of the specific features of the region and the common challenges it presents. However, to realise this scenario, three conditions need to be fulfilled:

- It is necessary to mobilise all the players involved, with a more prominent role being allotted to private operators and local communities, not forgetting civil society.
- It is necessary to draw up a genuine strategic plan for rural development in the South of the Mediterranean Region, which is designed to diversify activity, restore social cohesion, re-establish links between countryside and cities and preserve the environment.
- There must be responsible management of natural resources to ensure sustainable development. It should not merely serve to correct the effects of globalisation, but should provide a powerful means of bringing rural societies out of their undeveloped situation.

Conclusion

Agricultural and rural issues in the Mediterranean Region seem more strategic than ever. In a structural context of high unemployment and rapid urbanisation, it is of the utmost importance to restrict rural-urban drift and therefore to apply adequate regional planning policies. The latter represent the only means of establishing varied, economically viable production systems, which will take the local populations out of their current state of destitution and vulnerability, while ensuring participatory management of natural resources to preserve the environment. This policy should involve rigorous monitoring of product quality and stringent procedures to ensure traceability. Making food safe is the final basic challenge. The Mediterranean Region must succeed in establishing itself in the world agrifood market by specialising in typical local products (labelled to show protected designation of origin), and thereby offset the cost of importing food products with which the Region is less favourably endowed. Lastly we cannot insist enough upon the importance of adapting the pace of liberalisation in the Euro-Mediterranean zone to suit the agricultural and rural policies of the majority of the southern partner countries.

The optimistic scenario thus strives for a Mediterranean Region in which development would be sought collectively and thought through strategically. Moreover, the region could become an excellent place for exploring ways of mitigating the effects of globalisation and incorporating the need for progress and competitiveness into sustainable development projects. The latter would meet the region's own requirements and combine openness to the outside world with preservation of the diversity and richness of its heritage. Can the Mediterranean Region be made to appear as an original force in the multilateral discussions?

Because agriculture forms the basis of the Mediterranean identity and determines the structure of societies in the Region, there can be no doubt that joint action in pursuit of this strategic interest could arise from close cooperation, mobilising people and resources on the basis of solidarity, human sympathy and mutually benefit to both shores of the Mediterranean. In other words, the Mediterranean Region will discover a new equilibrium by reconciling the advent of modern agriculture, open to the globalisation of trade, and the development of the still numerous peasant communities, and moving into diversified markets.