

Gaining recognition for the identity of Mediterranean products

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1. Preamble

The following statement presents a practical approach to the treatment of the objectives of the Conference as applied to Egypt. Some of the major issues that relate to the regional identity and safety of Mediterranean agricultural and agrifood products are identified and reviewed. This is followed by the presentation of the conditions and technical measures that are needed to deal with the different challenges encountered in the field of Mediterranean food.

To-date, little information is available in the public arena on agrifood products that claim an Egyptian origin and that are recognized to originate from Egyptian tradition. It is opportune at this point in time for Egypt to join in with its Mediterranean partners and enrich the list of Mediterranean foods with its age old food heritage and endogenous food processing technologies.

The presentation deals with the subject from a practical aspect that is drawn from the realities of the Egyptian context. The major challenges encountered are identified, and the conditions as well as the technical and other forms of support that a south Mediterranean country like Egypt may require in order to assume an active role in the above are reviewed.

2. The Egypt case

What does Egypt have to offer?

With a food system based on a cereal legume mix, the Egyptian traditional dietary pattern is characterized by being nutritionally balanced, high in dietary fiber, and low in saturated fat. Furthermore, food associations that enhance the nutritional and functional properties together with the medicinal attributes of different foods are part of the culture. The health qualities of the Egyptian dietary pattern and food products are regarded as a valuable asset. While studies of the nutritional value and some of the health attributes of Egyptian foods had been initiated as far back as the thirties, little is known worldwide about the list of typical foods and food products that can be identified to bear a truly Egyptian identity. This may be attributed to the fact that most of the data is found in government reports and that the researchers publish mostly in local "grey" literature.

A number of typical endogenous products and associated endogenous technologies have been identified in the course of a recently completed study of the continuity in the foods and food habits from antiquity till now. To date, only a handful of traditional food products have been exploited commercially. The recent and most important commercial exploitation by the Japanese food industry concerns are of products derived from the green leafy vegetable, *Corchorus olitorius* or Jew's Mallow. It is not only foods and food products that can be of interest, but also the methods and technology applied in processing them. The processing techniques commonly used of yore, were low energy consuming and depended in great measure on renewable sources. Endogenous methods depending on biomass as a source of energy continue to be used today in the production of traditional foods. In the area of food conservation, the ancients had developed a number of original food preservation and food transformation methods that are still in practice. Different techniques were applied in the preservation and storage of fish, meat, legumes, vegetables, green leafy vegetables, fruit, dairy products and cereals.

A selection can be made of Egyptian food products that combine the agreed criteria that render them attractive to the Mediterranean consumer and to the agrifood industry. Being a new partner in this domain, Egypt first needs to establish a system for protection of the intellectual property rights of its traditional food products before introducing them to industry and the market. An authority or organ of public interest will need to be created to control and protect the Egyptian identity.

Promotional advantage

Of all the south Mediterranean countries, promotional campaigns for Egyptian food products can draw both on their Mediterranean qualities as well as on their Egyptian identity. Furthermore, the agrifood market is a quasi virgin ground for products that originate from a purely Egyptian (not to be confused with Middle Eastern) tradition. The health qualities of the Egyptian dietary pattern and food products - validated by appropriate scientific evidence - represent a valuable marketing argument in particular for the 2030 consumer. Health is recognized to be the main driving force for the consumer of the future, and health foods are expected to occupy a privileged place among other foods. Furthermore, the place that the ancient Egyptian civilization and all that relates to it occupies in the minds, imagination and phantasms of people around the world ("Egyptomania") facilitates the task of marketing such products in particular when they claim validated health attributes that match the preferences of the European and global consumer.

Is Egypt prepared to become an active partner ?

To all appearances, Egypt is in a position to come forward and bring to the list of Mediterranean foods its own rich heritage of typical Egyptian foods. This is not the case. A remark was made to the Secretary General of CIHEAM at the time of the December 2006 Cairo Ministerial Conference to the effect that much ground has to be covered to create the conditions that can allow Egypt - a country with a rich food heritage - to contribute on an equal footing in efforts for valorization of the identity and qualities of Mediterranean agrifood products. European countries have been privileged with an early start when it comes to food quality and food safety. Furthermore, they have led the way in the battle for the market recognition of the identity and specific qualities of typical Mediterranean food products. South Mediterranean countries, whose food heritage has not yet been fully exploited on regional or global markets, have a great deal of catching up to do. The task of catching up needs to be seriously assumed if they want to become partners on an equal footing and reap the potential benefits accrued from exploitation of their rich heritage.

One of the main challenges facing Egypt, is to be able to deal with the trans-sectoral and multidisciplinary nature of the various elements that make up the required groundwork and to recognize the interdependence between the respective responsibilities of the involved sectors. This calls for an appropriate multi-sectoral managerial framework (that allows for joint decision making) with modalities for communication that cut across sectors. It must be realized that not one sector can be solely responsible. Sustainability of effort, attention to fundamentals and the importance of protecting the synergy produced by the convergence of complementary actions through the coordinated and coherent inputs from all concerned sectors are basic ingredients of success. It is fortunate for Egypt that political will and declared political backing are guaranteed. However, attention is drawn to the considerable research effort that is needed to overcome the research gaps that will become evident once all the available data produced by earlier research on traditional foods is collected and compiled. Resources, human and other, will need to be mobilized for the implementation of such a programme.

Options for exploitation of Egypt's contribution to the Mediterranean food heritage

The ideal modality for investment in exploitation of Egypt's food heritage is one that can combine and draw benefits from both the aspired commercial gains and the commitment to sustainable rural development. The nature of the food or food product to be produced, the production method and techniques involved, the risk of exposure to health hazards, are some of the factors that can influence the decision on the conditions best suited for production of a given traditional product. The options include:

- A purely commercial market approach targeting the occupation of an identified niche in the market through exploiting the novelty of the product, nutritional quality, functional food features and/or health claims, as well the cultural and historical exotic characteristics. The agrifood industry identifies a typical endogenous product that presents all the characteristics that can guarantee a high potential for commercial success and appropriates itself of it. A production line is established and the product is introduced to the market.
- A developmental approach that integrates the related EU policies and strategies in particular those of the Neighbourhood and Association agreements such as the sustainable rural development policies that promote local economic growth and development. The latter, applied to local communities, will also address - *inter alia* - energy conservation and environmental protection concerns; income generation; food security; gender dimensions. In such an approach the agrifood product, produced at the traditional micro-level under strict quality and safety control, is commercialized locally or regionally, and may even reach the global markets if the producers are able to benefit from appropriate guidance and technical support.
- A combination of both the above may be adopted in a case by case approach, the decisive element often being the nature of the product itself and the special requirements of a particular production process. This model may create an operational partnership relation between the agrifood industry and the local micro-level production groups (mostly women) who are the owners of endogenous know how. The main feature of this model is that the community can have access to a share in the economic gains. The industrial partner can provide technical and product development support when needed. This working partnership facilitates quality assurance and conformity to EU norms.
- The fourth case is a situation where a specific traditional product that is identified on the basis of valuable qualities that render it attractive to the EU and world consumer, is produced locally under conditions that do not satisfy EU safety and quality norms. If the selection of such a product is maintained, it is produced commercially under safe conditions taking care not to depreciate its characteristic organoleptic qualities. It is proposed to investigate the possibility for \creation of a tax (return on benefit) that is paid by a commercial partner to obtain the authorization to exploit the symbolic capital and the added value gained from producing and marketing the Egyptian origin/identity of a traditional food product.

A comment on initiatives relevant to the subject

Nutritional analysis of traditional and popular foods has been going on for more than half a century. Current research aims to identify culinary and food technology solutions that simplify and shorten food preparation time for traditional foods and adapt them to the demands of the modern consumer. Though there are no restaurants specialized in truly Egyptian food, a limited number of authentic ancient dishes have been successfully introduced in luxury hotel chains in Egypt. A programme for documentation of the Egyptian Food Heritage by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Centre for Documentation of the Cultural Heritage of Egypt is pending implementation once a system for protection of the property rights of inherited food related endogenous knowledge and technology is established. Limited initiatives for commercial production of foods of authentic Egyptian identity have been marketed locally. The most widely produced and commercialized food item is the roasted and dried green wheat (fereek) which was the ancient Egyptian's rice.

The few food items that are currently being exported are unable to fully exploit their Egyptian identity in the absence of a label system. An important development in this area is the creation of an Egyptian label for biological products. European investment in the modernization of the agrifood industry in Egypt has provided valuable support to facilitate trade and open markets to Egyptian products through the work of the Egyptian Traceability Centre. A nascent modern food industry is credited to the EU Industrial Modernization Programme. The decision to decentralize the services of the accredited laboratories of the Regional Centre for Food and Feed and the implantation of a network of laboratories at all major ports and airports is being implemented according to a phased plan. This is expected to raise the national capacity for quality and safety control of goods.

Constraints and stumbling blocks

Four issues are considered to represent stumbling blocks that stand in the way of Egypt's prospects for full participation in a Mediterranean partnership project for promotion of the identity and quality of Mediterranean foods. They relate to, a) the trans-sectoral nature of the subject; b) the low level of attention accorded to building and completing basic fundamentals such as appropriate legal, normative and policy frameworks; c) the observed accelerated disappearance of traditional food production and food consumption patterns; and d) the apparent low awareness of the grave implications of the progressive degradation in the quality of natural resources and how this can eventually compromise the achievement of Mediterranean agrifood industry goals.

The constraints given above relate to four concerns in four domains, namely, managerial, supportive, existential, and environmental. They are the result of a reflection that goes beyond the input intensive pilot phase and short lived impressive gains, and examines the situation with regard to sustainability (all aspects), the ability to consolidate gains, evolve, innovate and achieve significant progress. The relative degree of their importance is judged by their ability to limit, interrupt or change the course of events. These four stumbling blocks can stand in the way of Egypt realizing the full potential offered by the opportunity to join in with its Mediterranean family and exploit one of its most precious assets - that of its food lore.

With regard to the environmental issue, the authorities will need to be aware that the policy for leaving the "old lands" and cultivating the new reclaimed land outside the polluted valley so as to be able to market the export quality crops cannot apply to traditional foods and food products. The latter cannot be separated from their geographic origins which are an integral part of the identity for most of them. Agricultural landscapes are directly linked to a cultural heritage which is the outcome of a succession of generations of farmers. Containing the environmental challenge thus becomes a priority task and current important efforts mobilized to improve rural sanitation will need to be proactively exploited in favour of protection of agricultural interests. Mention is made of the several billion pounds earmarked by the Government for improving rural sanitation services in the current 5-year development plan and of the World Bank supported project for upgrading the "Operational Framework for Integrated Rural Sanitation Service Delivery".

3. Key ingredients for success

Observations made following analysis of problems encountered in Egypt have given rise to the following list. The mere presence of a service in a country does not mean that the service can "deliver" what is expected from it as a contribution towards an agreed Mediterranean objective. It is the efficiency and the quality of the performance that is important. The issue of the food safety system in Egypt is given as an example. It is not enough to tick off the physical presence of the organ as satisfying the condition of possessing a national food safety system. We need to verify that the system is built around modern scientific concepts, applies modern technological advances, and that it has the capacity and the competence to operate efficiently. In this respect, the Egyptian food safety system falls short of fulfilling the role expected from it. This constitutes a grave drawback for Egypt.

The list represents a few examples (from a south Mediterranean perspective) of actions that can overcome identified weak areas or weaknesses so as to be able to succeed in making significant progress toward valorization of the quality and identity of Mediterranean foods.

- The presence of a competent authority(ies) for application of and conformity with EU and world quality and safety norms, building on the national commitment to do so.
- Technical, organizational and procedural capacity at the national level for utilization of the instruments for application of shared quality and safety norms.
- Participating south Mediterranean countries need to possess a robust research capacity in all related fields (including anthropological and socio-cultural research) giving attention to research and development (R&D) support to smaller local enterprises and agrifood producers.
- The establishment (if not already present) of a national accreditation authority and a label system qualified to attribute the various labels of quality, geographic indication, etc.
- Develop a system (as well as a code of ethics) for protection of intellectual property rights of inherited endogenous knowledge.

- Identification of possibilities for applying financial schemes that can direct a certain return on commercial gains to benefit the “owners” of the endogenous knowledge.
- Conjugation of economic gains with sustainable rural development programmes, without losing sight of environmental and human development objectives.
- The presence of an information system that allows for access to timely and pertinent information by all partner countries.
- Consider the creation of a “Mediterranean” organ/group/consortium with the responsibility to monitor progress and provide guidance and technical support when needed to countries joining in a programme for valorization of Mediterranean agrifood products. This will necessarily build on the long experience gained by those EU countries that have made considerable headway in this direction.

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