

NOTES

Sustainable food systems. Change of route in the Mediterranean

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The Mediterranean region is facing growing intertwined challenges, within a complex and rapidly changing Mediterranean scenario, including water scarcity, land degradation, climate change, the rise of non-communicable diseases, social and economic discrepancies and immigrations, impacting food security, health, nutrition, and sustainability, and the livelihoods of all Mediterranean people.

The Mediterranean is historically the meeting area of ancient millenary civilizations, characterized by a multiplicity of countries with marked environmental, cultural, social, economic and political differences. Located at the crossroads between Africa, Asia and Europe, today the Mediterranean is a region where growing interdependent challenges are undermining the sustainability of food systems, and negatively impacting on their populations and natural resources.

Population growth with demographic changes, urbanization, and globalization, are all driving increased food demand and influencing food choices, which have resulted in profound changes in food production/processing patterns, in food consumption patterns and lifestyles.

The Mediterranean is marked by the heterogeneity among, and within, its countries and a growing gap between the advanced economies in the Northern shores and the less developed ones in the Southern/Eastern ones. Across the Mediterranean region, there is an “*inegalitarian drift*” in the current relations between Northern Mediterranean countries and Southern-Eastern ones, where many difficulties are encountered due to the existing economic, social/cultural disparities and conflicts, with an ever-growing gap between developed economies and those that are less so.

The GDP (Gross Domestic Product)/per capita highlights a profound difference between Mediterranean economies which inevitably has repercussions on the social, environmental, and social dimensions of people livelihoods.

The region is marked by a “nutrition transition state” in which the prevalence of undernutrition (wasting, stunting, underweight) and micronutrient deficiencies are overshadowed by the prevalence of overweight, obesity and diet-related chronic non-communicable dis-

eases with undesirable impacts on the health and related public expenditure. The growing erosion of the Mediterranean diet heritage, by the loss of its adherence among Mediterranean populations, is alarming as it has undesirable impacts not only on health and nutrition, but also on social, cultural, economic and environmental sustainability dimensions in Mediterranean countries.

Accelerated climate change has further exacerbated existing environmental problems in the region that are caused by the combination of changes in drought and desertification processes, increasing pollution and declining biodiversity.

Disruptions of imports from Ukraine and Russia has further exposed Mediterranean countries to food shortfalls with increasing in prices, with combined effects on production cuts, export restrictions, energy prices and difficulties in logistics with negative impacts on both producers and consumers, worsening food insecurity in the region.

A change of route

The book *Sustainable Food Systems. Change of Route in the Mediterranean*, edited by Sandro Dernini and Roberto Capone and published in 2024 by CIHEAM Bari, offers a unique multi-perspective, with multiple trajectories, essential for comprehensively tackling these pressing challenges, integral to Mediterranean food systems. Coping with these interdependent challenges is crucial with a Mediterranean Sustainable Food System (SFS-MED) vision oriented towards accelerating in the region the United Nations Agenda 2030, by aligning global and local objectives and expediting the Agenda at the country level.

The book presents 21 original contributions from different perspectives by leading experts, who participated as moderators of thematic sessions at the Third World Conference on the Revitalization of the Mediterranean Diet, entitled *A Change of Route Towards More Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems in the Mediterranean Countries. The Mediterranean Diet as a Strategic Resource for Accelerating the Agenda 2030 in the Region*, organized at the CIHEAM Bari Institute in September 2022. It also represents the continuation of an intense collaboration that has lasted for several years with these authors.

The book addresses together the sustainability of the whole food system, from production to consumption, and acknowledging inter-relationships ecosystem-dependent and inter-dependencies of different sectors, with local specificities as well as regional and global complexities impacting Med food systems and diets.

Tackling food systems transformation in the Mediterranean region requires considering sustainable food systems as a whole, rather than their separate parts, and going beyond disciplinary approaches and silos.

There is a need to take into consideration a web of interconnected and interdependent components within a decision-making environment concerning food systems that is very fragmented, and where there is a wide range of voices from different interest groups and agendas, with diverse institutional and agroecological constraints in countries and territories on all shores of the Mediterranean.

The book advocates for a change in the mainstreaming narrative surrounding the Mediterranean diet, positioning it not just as a healthy dietary pattern but also as sustainable diet model, a strategic sustainable lever for accelerating the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Mediterranean countries. It highlights the need of a change

of perception on the Mediterranean diet as a strategic resource of sustainable development for Mediterranean countries by linking together sustainable food consumption and sustainable food production. The book offers SFS-MED innovative approaches and operational proposals for fostering synergies across sectors and providing guidance for decision-makers and stakeholders interested in advancing economic, environmental, and social sustainability in the region.

The book advocates for a “Change of Route”, requiring a new transdisciplinary rethinking, a change in the mindset overcoming silos of disciplines, different levels of specialization, and fragmented sectoral approaches. It highlights the need to bring together sciences and humanities and connecting the peoples, through transdisciplinary cross-cutting research on overlapping areas and multistakeholder initiatives such as SFS-MED Platform and living labs for enabling necessary conditions for an effective SFS-MED shift at country and regional levels.

The centrality of the Mediterranean consumer and of the so called “food environment” is highlighted in the book within this “Change of route” by taking into high consideration existing inequalities between Northern and Eastern Med countries, and differences in terms of food consumption, marked by different abilities to consume, and especially in large urban agglomerations.

The book as a “*white paper*”, as a foresight exercise, provides useful food policy operational proposals, integrating different agriculture, environmental, economic, health/nutrition and cultural Med dimensions, with a focus towards improving food systems towards sustainability in the Med countries, with attention of offering economic and social opportunities, particularly for small-scale farmers, fishermen, youth, and women in areas highly affected by migration.

Building-up an SFS-MED CIHEAM Vision 2030

The CIHEAM Secretary-General Teodoro Miano within his opening address “Moving Forward” to the book chapter “Challenges and Solutions: From Theory to Action” outlines an innovative SFS-MED vision by presenting a holistic conceptual model based on the connections of food systems with two large biological entities, on the one hand Nature and on the other hand Human Beings, in a complex equation through which to link food production and consumption in a sustainable manner.

The complexity of the relationship stems from two main factors: Firstly, food production is intricately linked within various domains. Secondly, consumption extends beyond individual acts, encompassing socio-economic factors inherent to its environment. The conventional model of connection between fundamental or applied research on one side and private businesses on the other side has shown clearly a very limited utility in producing growing and empowering steps for the benefit of local and regional communities.

The importance of strengthening the SFS-MED platform, which brings together the CIHEAM, the FAO, the Union for the Mediterranean and the Prima Foundation, under the umbrella of the United Nations Program for Sustainable Food Systems One Planet Network, is highlighted in the CIHEAM vision for more inclusive multi-stakeholder collaboration as a fundamental element for coping with the complex scenario facing Mediterranean countries by liaising all interested stakeholders, from policymakers and researchers to pro-

ducers and consumers, towards a sustainable transformation of food systems and diets in the region, to drive to the SDGs achievement in the Mediterranean countries, refreshing the concepts generated by the declaration of the Matera G20 meeting.

Increasing awareness and mobilizing action regarding the pivotal role of consumers in the transformation of SFS-MED is a challenging task within the framework of sustainable consumption and production (SCP). This necessitates the establishment of a new, innovative SFS-MED food environment as part of the implementation of actions within the SFS-MED Platform.

The SFS-MED Platform provides a collaborative space for discourse and knowledge exchange on various facets of food policies, regulatory frameworks, natural resource utilization and management, food production techniques, transformation processes for both food and non-food items, consumption patterns, and the facilitation of conducive conditions for business development. Moreover, it actively promotes trade relations and international partnerships while advocating for sustainable solutions across social, economic, and environmental dimensions within the Mediterranean countries and the broader region.

The need of a novel approach is highlighted for a different working environment in which all actors and stakeholders share various approaches, backgrounds and experiences and actively co-plan solution-based procedures and actions. Complexity should be faced with complex tools and methodologies.

The CIHEAM vision 2030 for Mediterranean sustainable food systems aims to encourage the transition from an exclusively agri-food production approach to sustainable food consumption by placing the Mediterranean diet (as a sustainable diet) at the center of this new dynamic.

Conventionally, the consumer is considered very important because, through his own choices, he plays a leading role in directing production, since it is the consumer who chooses the products based on different variables. (Origin, method of production or their producer, the way they buy, transport, store, cook and consume food, disposable income, socio-economic status, religion, culture, marketing, etc.). But what emerges from reading the book is that in the transition towards more sustainable food systems, the main protagonist is no longer the consumer, but the “Food Environment”, i.e. mean: “the physical, economic, political and socio-cultural environment, in which consumers interact with the food system to make decisions regarding the acquisition, preparation and consumption of food”.

Building-up the SFS-MED CIHEAM Vision 2030, by acting together on the “*Natural Resources*” and the “*Food Environment*” could be an important contribution for a food systems transformation towards sustainability in the region, as well as, in the countries and contributing, at the same time, to the revitalization” of the Mediterranean diet, as a model of sustainable and healthy eating for the 21st century.