

## Rural Development Policies in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: a viable and strategic approach

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Be it a subject of study, a multidimensional growth process or a field of political intervention, rural development is arousing a great deal of interest worldwide and despite its relatively short history, it has inspired so far a considerable number of theories and a significant proliferation of approaches and action tools.

Social and economic changes related to globalisation and to the evolving geo-political scenarios, on one hand, and to the needs of reviewing public expenditure in most countries, on the other hand, have induced numerous scientists and politicians to give more careful consideration to the effectiveness of choices and orientations of national and international policies for redistribution of income, focusing on development policies in rural areas and on the role of rural development as engine for economic growth and social balance.

In the international setting of rural development, the Mediterranean Euro-partnership assumes a special interest and represents a valuable meeting and confrontation point between the appreciated and imitated European rural development model and the multi-faceted and complex experience the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries (SEM-C) have acquired in these last decades.

The inefficiency of economic development models implemented in the '60s and '70s - based on industrial growth and technological transfer - as well as the inadequacy of development policies based on sectoral planning and on the implementation of structural adjustment programmes which did not take into consideration the socio-economic, cultural and institutional specificities of the intervention areas, have not brought about deep and effective changes in the quality of life, and even less in the concerned rural areas.

The emerging interest and the need for modifying planning processes and implementing new growth mechanisms increasingly impose the use of multi-sectoral approaches, through progressive administrative decentralization and the participation of civil society in defining development strategies without adopting generalized and pre-established problem solving recipes.

Therefore, rural development policies are recognized increasingly wider and diversified functions and objectives capable of solving diversified problems and adaptable to different territorial and economic contexts.

Rural areas in the Mediterranean Basin are quite diversified in their history, culture, natural conditions, population density, sett-

lements, economic structure, and human resources, that call for different interventions and adaptations, but share the establishment of new bases for economic and social life.

Agricultural activity in southern and northern Mediterranean countries still plays a pivotal role in rural economy, but has different weight and functions in the framework of rural development policies. Undoubtedly, improving agricultural competitiveness is a cause of concern in both northern and SEM countries. As for the former, however, efforts seem to be mostly oriented to the promotion of quality of agricultural production - in nutritional, environmental, and ethical terms - and to the conservation and enhancement of the linkages such production has with the rural environments of origin. As for the latter, the increase in competitiveness necessarily passes through completing the modernization process of this sector that involves large farms that have access to resources, to capitals and extension services, but also many small producers, especially those living in harsh and remote agro-ecological areas who require low risk and labour-intensive technical innovations.

In such a context, the orientations of rural development policies, though diverging in identifying needs and solutions to the problems, somehow converge in defining objectives and applying tools.

Rural development in the EU countries is the direct result of diversification of labour and agriculture covers only a small portion of it. Thus, interventions aim at supplementing the income of rural population with other local socio-economic components that ensure the survival of land and communities.

LEADER programmes are a fitting example of territorial, multi-sectoral and integrated approach to rural development and are a form of innovatory interventions that arouse a great interest in the Euro-Mediterranean context and spark off a new Mediterranean cooperation approach.

In the SEMC, rural development is a key and indispensable component of economic development.

In these countries, agriculture still represents the pillar of rural economy both in terms of income and labour, in view of the few non-agricultural activities and the lack of resources and infrastructures.

Governments' efforts thus aim at boosting agricultural potentials through a better use of water and land resources and the implementation of huge investment projects to improve efficiency.

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However, even in the SEMC, despite financial difficulties and administration hindrances, the need and interest start being felt of preparing integrated programmes related to rural development policies in agreement with the most common worldwide approaches.

An example being the establishment of a special ministry in Algeria, the adoption of a detailed rural development plan in Morocco, the programmes for the diversification of rural activities in Tunisia and interventions for settling regional unbalances in income, infrastructures and land management - particularly evident in Egypt and Turkey – and finally the participation of associations and representatives of local communities, often promoted by so many international donors and NGO that fund rural development projects in the SEM countries.

Despite its diversity and specificities, rural development in the Mediterranean Basin appears to be a fertile ground for concurrence and agreement between partners of the two shores, so much so to attribute it a catalysing role for valuable cooperation actions. In fact, from the point of view of international balance, most of the rural development measures are not supposed to create market distortions and should then be considered in defence of the “green box” discussed within the WTO negotiations, compatible with a freer trade of agricultural produce that could contribute to improve living conditions and production system conditions.

Moreover, rural development policy could be a triggering factor in the liberalization process of the EU-SEM countries exchanges. This means that agricultural producers of the EU Mediterranean countries could open up more to the flow of agricultural products from the SEM countries to the EU market in exchange of policies aimed at balancing the EU expenditure between continental and Mediterranean products. This could be feasible through rural development-related measures agreed upon within the WTO and addressed to the European Mediterranean countries in order to compensate for the greater vulnerability of their products with respect to increased imports from the SEM countries. In a way, the north-south trade conflict could be partially settled though a significant transfer of financial resources to rural development programmes aimed at strengthening the links between commercial objectives and non-economic objectives in the Mediterranean basin. Finally, the prospects of setting up a free trade zone in the Mediterranean Basin should be paralleled by policies more consistent with rural development objectives. Due to the presence of many fragile areas in the SEM countries, the liberalization process of the EU-SEM countries exchanges risks intensifying the pressure on natural resources, already so rare, with negative impacts on environmental degradation, on the output of industrial wastes, on water and air pollution, on the use of labour and land and, last but not the least, on the increased economic-social unbalances in the region. It is thus essential to integrate the matter of the free trade zone with common procedures and rural development-related interventions

such to compensate and mitigate any negative externality and strengthen the normalization of economic activities within the Euro-Mediterranean region.

In such a scenario, the rural development approach finds large consensus and positive application within the Mediterranean Basin. The debates and interventions adopted in most of the EU countries and in the Mediterranean as a whole, lead to think that rural development policies will gain momentum as an adequate tool to favour common growth processes within the Mediterranean.

It would mean to develop bilateral cooperation forms between southeast and northern Mediterranean rural areas, in such a way to create synergies and links between civil societies and local stakeholders within rural development actions.

One should abandon the old and inefficient cooperation systems of Mediterranean cooperation based on trade concessions and adopt mechanisms that enhance territorial capability by using some previously undisclosed competitive advantages and delocalising rural activities organized and managed by groups of civil society who know their own needs and capabilities.

Undoubtedly, the EU should make a huge effort by targeting programming to Mediterranean cooperation and bringing into action the tools already adopted in the rural development policies within the EU.

But, there is still a long way to go and no horizon is in sight yet, in spite of the frequent meetings and official debates at the Euro-Mediterranean level. It would suffice to notice that the financial tool within the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the MEDA programme, doesn't allocate any specific expenditure to agriculture and to rural development. Moreover, practically speaking, rural development as a tool is spreading slowly and not effectively. Expenditures for rural development policies in the EU, for instance, represent only 12%, approximately, of the CAP expenditure.

The Mediterranean cooperation should be granted new tools that may really have a positive impact on production, but also on the social, environmental and cultural sphere, as well as on integration between peoples. It is become inevitable to conceive and implement a new partnership approach based on a more incisive and efficient regional cooperation and on the reinforcement of EU structural and cohesion policies.

Rural development could then become a strategic tool, not exclusively to the benefit of the EU for achieving its own internal objectives, but to be shared by and useful to all rural areas of the Mediterranean region, and the application of which will cause no negative externality on strengthening the relationships between countries, rather it will really facilitate the fulfilment of the objectives of integration and shared prosperity as defined in the Barcelona declaration.