

Political will and agricultural paths in Euro-Mediterranean partnership: is orchestration possible?

Over the last few years, the debate concerning the evolutionary processes of the Mediterranean economic and social system has been rising. Attention to this area of interest grew considerably in relation to a few occurrences starting from the end of the 80's: the crises of development experienced by Mediterranean Countries, the migratory pressure growing from the same area, the progress of Moslem fundamentalism, the enlargement to the east of the EU and, last but not least, the conclusion of the Uruguay Round, stating a further liberalisation of the markets.

In this framework the EU has intensified relations with Mediterranean countries by renegotiating previous agreements and setting up a new generation of Mediterranean policy, defined during the Conference of Barcelona in November 1995 and launching the notion of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This strategy devised in favour of Mediterranean Countries tends to develop strong political, economic, social and cultural associations and integrate them in the European economic pole by means of the progressive achievement, by the horizon of 2010, of an Euro-Mediterranean free trade area.

It is adamant that the process of change provides numerous and intense impulses, whose impact varies according to the countries involved, often with contrasting effects. This is due to several factors, inherent to the countries, like their degree of economic development, the structural and organisational framework of existing production systems, the availability of natural resources and the training level of human resources. The Mediterranean area is so disparate that adjustment to external stimuli, and to the process of integration and development of Euro-Mediterranean partnership in particular, creates such different and contrasting paths and opinions that the identification of a single solution satisfying the needs of several single countries becomes arduous.

Therefore, the process of economic and social transition in the Mediterranean region requires further awareness of the different themes to be tackled and the empowerment of relations and initiatives, at various levels, with the objective of finding a common path to master ongoing mutations with a sensible stance.

In the framework of such initiatives, the dialogue started in 1999 on proposal of the Italian government and with the technical support of CIHEAM deserves special attention: it consists of the setting up of a yearly meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of Mediterranean countries that are members of CIHEAM. The work group is therefore formed by the Ministers of Agriculture and their representatives, coming from the majority of Mediterranean countries, with the intent of proposing and discussing the evolutionary aspects of agricultural policies in the region.

The objective of their meetings is that of strengthening international co-operation in agriculture in the framework of Euro-Mediterranean partnership, investigating themes thoroughly and promoting a programme of joint actions to urge initiatives in a larger international forum.

The starting point of the comparison is the presence of a remarkable asymmetry between population and use of resources, as well as of socio-economic disparities marking the Mediterranean region as a whole. Suffice it to observe that the population living in the Mediterranean area amounts to 500 million people, and that demographic growth has followed different trends in the north as compared to the south. So much so, that estimates for the year 2010 suggest that more than half of the Mediterranean population will live in the poorer countries of the southern shore, while in 1950 that share barely reached 27%, with a concentration in urban areas. The average income is moreover 5 times higher today in the northern shore as compared to the south, when in 1960 it was only 3.5 times as much. The food deficit, in close relation with the demographic evolution of the countries of the south, persists and tends to worsen. Over the last few years, the import of agricultural and food products and therefore the dependence on alien resources of the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean, Turkey excluded, has grown. Moreover the availability of natural resources, land and water in particular, of those countries is becoming increasingly unstable and scanty.

The themes tackled have been resumed during the meetings that followed the first one organised in Rome in 1999: Rabat 2000, Athens 2001 and Beirut 2002. It goes

without saying that the initiative has enjoyed great consensus among actors involved, as it devotes special attention to the sector of agriculture, after the partial marginalisation suffered during the Declaration of Barcelona, highlighting as agriculture is one of the main factors of development in the Mediterranean region.

The topics debated develop around three main issues: 1) Euro-Mediterranean relations, with special reference to the sector of agriculture, in the framework of partnership agreements and negotiation under way; 2) Assessment of the experience of the Uruguay Round and Seattle Conference to take into account a possible common approach; 3) Structural aspects of agricultural and sustainable development policies in the Mediterranean partner countries in the framework of partnership with the EU.

As to Euro-Mediterranean partnership, the liberalisation of agricultural products exchange in the area of the Mediterranean rises a few contrasting issues between partner countries on the two shores. On the one hand, the representatives of southern countries insist on a wider opening of EU markets, and on the other the member countries of the Union maintain that a further opening would endanger European Mediterranean agricultural productions, which are already scarcely supported in the framework of EU agricultural policy. The southern and eastern Mediterranean countries highlight however the need to take into consideration, as a starting point, the peculiarities of the economy of each country, devoting further attention to the protection of natural resources and knowledge and technology transfer to improve agricultural production systems. Attention is also driven to the need to harmonise national legal frameworks with international trade standards in order to develop agricultural exchanges and strengthen international co-operation for the creation of a two-fold free trade zone: among southern Mediterranean countries and between them and EU countries. Mediterranean countries belonging to the EU, in their turn, acknowledge the significance to develop economic and trade relations, and therefore the need to preserve a preferential margin in the exchanges of typical Mediterranean agricultural products. However, they reaffirm that such effort should be balanced by an adequate re-adjustment of CAP subsidies to support Mediterranean productions, and sided by a redistribution in the origin of staple agricultural products by Mediterranean countries, which have witnessed a considerable increase of exports from the rest of the world over the last few years. Obviously EU trade policy in relation to its Mediterranean partners is marked by scarce disclosure and abundant contradictions, as it grants access to EU markets by preferential agreements while creating severe hindrance with the setting up of customs barriers and miscellaneous obstacles.

As to the second issue on which multilateral meetings focus, the identification of a common solution protecting Mediterranean agriculture in the framework of multilate-

ral negotiations has emerged as a largely shared opportunity. The proposal to build a common platform must take into account both the specific regional features of each type of agriculture and pursue the objective to endorse common interests including the enhancement of the level of food safety and the quality of agricultural products as well as the protection of their origin, availability to negotiate further reductions of subsidies to export in the framework of a regulation including all forms of aid to export currently active in exporting countries, the definition of a specific regime for less developed countries to allow them to integrate progressively in the system of international trade, the maintenance of the price clause and special clause, and the refusal of any unilateral action questioning WTO regulations. In such context, it is easy to perceive the relevance of setting up a joint stance as to the definition of common marketing rules concerning the denomination of products coming from a single or several countries, and the promotion of such products, with the joint goal of protecting productions and markets in multilateral agricultural negotiations.

The very notion of multifunctional nature of agricultural activities, maintained by the EU, is supported by Turkey but is a cause of hesitation for the rest of Mediterranean countries. This is due to the uncertainty of its definition and of its actual application in the case of countries whose agricultural systems are marked by some degree of weakness. It is not easy to find a common approach on this issue, just think that the majority of the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean is forced to face problems relating to food security, in terms of food availability, desertification, and the difficulty in finding financial resources to organise measures of support to the development of agriculture. However, a joint orientation may be identified in a more punctual definition of the concept of multifunctionality, including not only the function of food production, but also the task to guarantee the sustainability of Mediterranean agriculture and the protection of natural resources, taking into account the differences in growth existing between the two shores. Based on this orientation, as it was proposed during the meetings held, the chance of a solidarity action among participating countries may be envisaged, with the creation of a reserve funded by developed countries and intended to finance the issues related to multifunctionality in less developed countries. An interesting proposal is that of starting a few actions in a limited number of areas, in the southern and eastern countries of the Mediterranean, co-operating with northern regions on a common programme. The objective of the experience would be that of implementing, with the support of the EU, a Mediterranean programme of rural development drawn after EU LEADER programme.

The third issue discussed concerns the approach of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and it highlights shared views as to the importance of agriculture in the process of

development of Mediterranean countries. Structural constraints marking its production systems and the strategic value of agriculture in the Mediterranean deserve further attention in the effort to build Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Therefore the proposal to and the commitment of the representatives of national Governments to introduce a support system, in the framework of financial resources available, for a programme of targeted actions aiming at the improvement of agricultural infrastructure and rural development, gained wide approval. In this respect, a shared view was that the financing modes adopted for MEDA I did not produce the expected results, and more simple and flexible implementation modes should be activated to avoid delays and difficulties in the accomplishment of projects envisaged in the new programme, integrating agriculture and rural development in MEDA II programme. In this framework, CIHEAM indeed carried out an excellent task, both in the sectors of training and research, with its ability to mobilise professional and institutional will in relation to the issues concerning Mediterranean agro-food systems. These considerations lead

to urge the EU to contribute to the creation of a Mediterranean scientific space, and CIHEAM to promote, in the framework of its activities, the setting up of a Mediterranean Observatory providing an information and documentation tool for public and private decision makers.

The issues examined are numerous and manifold, as manifold as the proposals of possible paths of development, considering the highly heterogeneous nature of the region involved. Paths of development however call for a precise political will and specific implementation programmes.

Nevertheless the debate goes on, with the meeting scheduled in France in 2003. Moreover, to reaffirm the awareness of Public Institutions as to the relevance of the action of Mediterranean integration, a Euro-Mediterranean conference on agriculture and fishing has been scheduled during the Italian presidency semester of the EU. Its results will strengthen the existing relations between countries and favour the process of creation of a sound Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

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MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

Between *Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari (CIHEAM-Bari)*
and *EUROPEAN SOCIETY OF AGRICULTURAL ENGINEERS (EurAgEng)*
for a

Strategic Alliance to Promote Sustainable Integrated Natural Resources Management

On January 2003, after several previous contacts between the Director of IAM-Bari, Dr. Cosimo Lacirignola, and the President of EurAgEng, Prof. Daniele De Wrachien, the following Memorandum of Understanding was signed.

The European Society of Agricultural Engineers (EurAgEng) exists to promote the profession of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering and the people who serve it. The Society is particularly active in: conferences, special interest groups, publications, networking and international lobbying.

EurAgEng is the European member of the World Wide Agricultural Engineering Organization (CICR).

EurAgEng is becoming increasingly active in making representations to decision makers in the European Union on the allocation of funds in agricultural engineering and it aim at:

- o Identifying and analysing opportunities for research and development to advance agriculture and associated industries;
- o Explaining, discussing and promoting these opportunities in Europe;
- o Encouraging and facilitating cooperation between appropriate engineers and scientists in the European Union and in countries with scientific agreements with the EU;
- o Making expert advice available in such fields as agricultural, biosystems and environmental engineering.

CIHEAM and EurAgEng are both professional organization engaged in the planning, use and management of land and water resources for sustainable rural development at international level and intend with this agreement to increase their links with likeminded organizations.