

The role of organic farming in fostering Euro-Mediterranean integration

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Organic farming was born from the need to distinguish its products from the conventional ones in the framework of satisfying an increasingly requiring and evolved market and guaranteeing to consumers the absence of polluted and contaminated products. All these reasons explain the widespread success and development of organic farming, especially in developed countries.

Organic products currently account for around 1% of the world's market and about 3% in Europe, and the organic surface is nearly 4% of the total UAA. Despite this modest market share, over the last few years, organic productions have experienced a strong evolution in the setting up of the adopted cultural practices, in the implementation of its regulation and in the improvement of the consumers' appreciation.

Its spread interested not only the European countries, or the industrialized ones, but also most of the lesser developed countries, including the Mediterranean countries that started perceiving the role played by organic farming in fostering the economic growth and the integration of markets with the European countries. Such a chance was underlined on the occasion of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of the Ministers of Agriculture, held in Venice in 2003, during which the participants witnessed a shared commitment to an integrated development of organic farming, boosting the economic growth, guaranteeing food security and protecting natural and environmental resources.

In the Mediterranean basin, given the existence of climatic conditions being unfavourable to the development of plant diseases and the common use of extensive techniques already present in the traditional agricultural production, many countries were under the influence of favourable market mechanisms and therefore started setting up certification procedures for the recognition of the organic produce in order to reach or better improve the economic value of productions.

In northern Mediterranean countries, besides the increase in the demand and the organizational capacity of the production chain, there are other elements paving the way to an optimistic growth. First of all, the new Regulation EU 834/2007 will soon be enforced to replace the Regulation 2029/91. It aims at rationalising the sector legislation through a clear definition of objectives and principles organic farming is based on and of products it applies to, by extending the legislative scope to production, processing and distribution phases and by tightening the inspection and labelling systems.

Furthermore, the most relevant aspect of the new Regulation is the strengthening of the concept of organic farming meant as a sustainable management system for agriculture. A second positive element is the Rural Development Plan 2007-2013 that, through the natural resources preservation and the territorial development, might give a substantial boost to the organic farming expansion.

As far as southern Mediterranean countries are concerned, the organic market is just dawning and produc-

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tion is almost only addressed to export given the modest consumers' purchasing power, the scarce organization of the domestic market and the reduced number of aids granted to farmers. Anyway, in these countries, organic farming presents a series of positive factors expressing a favourable development potentiality, such as the operators' desire to boost organic farming, the existence of an important production potential, the presence of favourable climatic conditions (early ripening), the availability, even though modest, of incentive funding for organic production, and the achievement of good yields of crops such as dates, olive oil, aromatic herbs and citrus.

The reduction in the inputs use (quite expensive for the standards of these countries), the lower labour cost and the production diversification allow the market-oriented farms to reach a satisfactory income and a good level of competitiveness.

One of the critical points of the organic farming sector in southern Mediterranean countries is the scarce enhancement of products. In most Mediterranean countries, organic products are almost completely exported in bulk and are labelled directly abroad by importing or processing companies.

Hence, it seems important to appeal to trading in order to encourage the development and integration of organic markets where the higher price of organic products with respect to conventional products push southern and northern Mediterranean producers to look for new technical and commercial solutions to conform to the market requirements.

Apart from the market aspects, organic farming plays a particularly important role within the society. The conversion of a farm to organic farming has an influence on different operational aspects, such as the ones related to the environment, the territorial development, the sustainable management of resources and to the job-demand.

On the basis of the factors previously analysed, it is possible to assume that the organic farming development in the Mediterranean area is not dependant upon the strengthening of its production chain, which is already present even though with a few critical points,

but upon a wider process related to the whole territorial production system where there exist stronger and stronger collaboration and synergism between the organic mechanisms, the market forces and the bases of rural development. The natural resources condition, the operators' integration and the well-defined market connotation can lead to the integration and enhancement of the Mediterranean agro-environmental system by involving farmers in the planning and management of all activities for the development of their own territory.

Briefly, the features of most agricultural systems in Mediterranean countries, based on extensive techniques, modest use of capital and technical means and frequent use of manual work, enhance in many areas the conversion or, better, the use of soils by applying organic methods.

Furthermore, as for its more general social and sustainable development role, organic farming could further contribute to pave the way to the integration and cooperation processes undertaken in the round of trade liberalisation in the Mediterranean basin and to facilitate the setting up of the neighbourhood policy enforced by the EU in Mediterranean rural areas.

The organic agriculture method is defined by well-determined rules, subjected to specific controls, based on common and simple environmentally-friendly production techniques and characterized by a specific quality identification. All these features make organic farming suitable for the realization of synergic actions and the creation of technical and commercial know-how networks between different regions. That is exactly what happened in the Mediterranean basin and proved to be particularly effective with some specific Mediterranean products. Indeed, being based on well-defined rules and standards, organic farming may now fill the structural and economic gap between Mediterranean countries, enhance the territorial development of less favoured areas, make trade relations more reliable thus allowing southern and northern Mediterranean agri-food industries work together for the growth and development of the whole Euro-Mediterranean region.