

Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation in Agriculture: a New Boost from Venice

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The first Euro-Mediterranean Conference of the Ministers of Agriculture held in Venice last November marked a turning point of great political relevance for the Mediterranean region. Agriculture is a pivotal sector in the national economies of this area, both for the weight of the population working in agriculture and for its incidence on GDP; notwithstanding, agricultural issues have been debated by EU –member states and by Mediterranean Third Countries only within Euro-Mediterranean Conferences on trade in the eight years after the Barcelona Declaration. Indeed, over the last years the EU attention has been focused on the Eastern European countries. After the successful enlargement of the union to 10 new countries, the EU is re-launching the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue.

For the first time, the ministers of Agriculture could spark off the debate on this issue in Venice. The discourse could finally embrace all the aspects of agriculture and rural development in the perspective of a strong and fruitful partnership. And CIHEAM has contributed towards paving this way. Since 1999, the ministers of Agriculture of CIHEAM member states have met yearly to make the point on the sector and to define some common initiatives. During the last meeting, the Beirut Conference in September 2002, the Italian Minister Gianni Alemanno launched the idea of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference. Consensus was broad and unanimous.

It was not easy to bring together the Ministers of Agriculture of the 15 EU member states, of the 10 countries that will access the Union next May and of the 12 Mediterranean Third Countries which joined the “Barcelona process”. The preliminary steps performed by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture requested continuous contacts with the European Commission and the national governments. A long way to go fraught with difficulties which could be overcome thanks to a close net of intergovernmental relations and a patient work of mediation. It was therefore possible to open the Conference with a full consensus on the agenda and especially with a shared vision of a concrete and farsighted Euro-Mediterranean agricultural policy capable of efficiently tackling the issue of development. This result bears testimony of the success achieved by one of the most important initiatives of the

Italian Presidency of the European Union.

Market agreements and trade were not tackled in Venice. The ministers focused their attention on the other pillar of development: international cooperation, training of human resources, regulating product quality, productive integration of chains, rural development, protection of natural resources, organic agriculture, gender issue, combating poverty. Much attention was paid to the major challenges shared by the Mediterranean countries: modernization and restructuring of agriculture, qualification and enhancement of specificities, complementary productions, land management, re-equilibrium of the water balance, combating desertification.

In the final document of the Conference – welcomed by the following Euro-Mediterranean Conference of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs held in Naples in December – the Ministers of Agriculture highlighted three main thematic areas deserving a specific regional programme: rural development, quality of agricultural products, organic agriculture. Elaborated jointly by the European Commission and by the southern and eastern Mediterranean partner countries and implemented with the involvement of international organizations, this programme would enable to strengthen the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and support Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries in their transition towards a free trade area.

The programme should be characterised by measures promoting partnership initiatives for developing human resources, exchange of knowledge and transfer of know how and innovative technologies that may be efficiently used under harsh environmental conditions.

The objectives are the complementarity of productive systems, the integration of agri-food chains, the achievement of common standards on the product quality, integrated and sustainable development, the dissemination of organic agriculture. The ultimate goal is the enhancement of agricultural and agri-food products typical of the Mediterranean region.

Venice laid the ground for re-launching the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation hinged on the partnership in agriculture which is still a crucial sector in economic, social, demographic and political terms for the Mediterranean region.

Conclusions of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Agriculture (Venice, 27 November 2003)

A. The Conference took note of the following considerations with regard to agricultural cooperation in the Mediterranean:

1. The creation of a Euro-Mediterranean area of shared prosperity, as envisaged by the Barcelona Declaration of 28 November 1995, is one of the key objectives of the Barcelona Process. The organisation of a Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Agriculture fits squarely within the framework of those objectives.
2. Moreover, this is the right time to hold a conference on agriculture, given the reform of the common agricultural policy, ongoing multilateral discussions under the Doha Development Agenda and the forthcoming enlargement of the European Union to include ten new Member States in which agriculture is a significant sector.
3. Consequently, the initiative by the Presidency of the European Union to hold, for the first time since the Barcelona Process was launched in 1995, a Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference entirely devoted to agriculture is welcome in order to move forward certain high-priority issues in agricultural relations between the Community and Mediterranean third countries.
4. In this context, it is worth stressing that stronger agricultural ties between the countries around the Mediterranean and the creation of a common platform for certain areas of agricultural policy will contribute to the European Community's new "neighbourhood" policy, intended to promote intra-regional, sub-regional and cross-border cooperation;
5. It is also worth recalling that the Euro-Mediterranean Agreements contain provisions on areas of bilateral cooperation in agriculture and involve the progressive and reciprocal liberalisation of trade in agricultural products by 2010.
6. For this purpose, and in accordance with the recommendations of its Action Plan, the Euro-Mediterranean Conference held in Valencia in April 2002 tasked the Commission with conducting an impact study on the liberalisation of trade in agriculture, the results of which are expected in 2004; discussion of this topic will therefore continue when the study is finalised.
7. While recognising that the two shores of the Mediterranean differ in terms of their economic development, the non-Community countries of the Mediterranean and some of the Community's own Mediterranean regions share certain similar challenges in the agricultural sector.
8. Accordingly, the Barcelona Declaration and the associated work programme itemise a number of areas of cooperation in the agricultural sector, in particular the modernisation and restructuring of agriculture, integrated rural development including better basic services and the development of related economic activities, the promotion of environmentally friendly farming, issues of water management and the combating of desertification;
9. In the context of the Barcelona Declaration, the instruments of this cooperation shall be the exchange of experiences and know-how, together with technical assistance and training.
10. Closer attention now needs to be paid to the link between agriculture and the environment in the Mediterranean area, particularly in the light of the climate change which we are now living; consequently, one of the priorities of jointly developed programmes must be the management of water resources. In this context, the Turin Declaration adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Integrated Local Water Management in October 1999 is of particular importance.
11. The significance of agri-environmental measures and the Natura 2000 network in terms of fulfilling the Göteborg European Council's commitments concerning sustainable development should also be emphasised.
12. The increased importance attached by the Community to the needs of sustainable rural development, the preservation of agriculture in less-favoured and mountain areas and the multi-functional nature of agriculture requires the Community to take due account of these topics in its dealings with its Mediterranean partners.
13. The improvement of product quality is also one of the shared priorities of the Community and its Mediterranean partners, and responds both to the requirements of increasingly demanding consumers and to the need to find new market niches, not only in the context of trade between the Community and the non-Community Mediterranean countries, but also in the context of finding new world markets.

14. Beyond the aspects traditionally linked to trade, there is a shared willingness to put the emphasis on improving the quality of the products traded, notably through the promotion of typical local products and organic productions.
15. The development of organic products and the protection of designations of origin and geographical indications around the Mediterranean, together with the promotion of trade in them, could provide added value to the trade between the Community and the Barcelona partner countries;
16. The Community has played a leading role in determining the legislative aspects of organic farming and protected designations of origin and geographical indications, and could share its know-how and experience in this field with its Mediterranean partners;

B. In view of the above considerations, the Conference suggests the following initiatives to develop agricultural cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean:

17. A work programme will be developed and initiated by the European Community in cooperation with its partner countries in the Mediterranean and implemented with the involvement of the organisations which are active in that region and which represent most of the Mediterranean partner countries.
18. Drawing on the complementarity of the various forms of Mediterranean agriculture, this programme could comprise, inter alia, a number of measures designed to further develop the chosen priority subjects and thereby enhance Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in farming, in order to establish certain principles regarding various aspects of agricultural cooperation and feasibility of individual measures and to promote common positions in the international consultation and negotiation fora.
19. In the light of the experience gained through cooperation in this field, all the issues that have an impact on sustainable rural development, the quality of agricultural products and organic farming could in due course benefit from a specific regional programme funded by MEDA within the limits of available resources. Such a programme would ensure compatibility with the Community policy in these areas and provide greater support for development in Mediterranean countries, easing their transition to a liberalised economic area in a sector of major economic, social, demographic and political significance.
20. The work programme should consequently focus on the following three areas: sustainable rural development, quality of agricultural products and organic farming.

a) To enhance rural development, in particular with regard to agriculture and environment

- Launch a platform for Euro-Mediterranean dialogue on sustainable rural development that would serve as a forum for discussing European experience and progress in this area, including a number of projects already started by the organisations active in this sector, and which would give the non-Community Mediterranean countries the chance to put forward their own concerns and present the strategies they have adopted.
- Launch an experts' exchange programme between the Community's southern members and the non-Community Mediterranean countries, in order to transfer know-how and experience gained in programmes.
- Take stock regularly of the existing rural development programmes and explore the possibility of establishing institutional cross-border cooperation on rural development schemes, along the lines of the Community's Leader Initiative.
- Promote rural development measures aiming at diversifying agricultural activities and developing alternative activities that create jobs and generate income in rural areas, such as rural tourism and craft trades.
- Develop activities aimed at rationalising the use of water resources for irrigation, through integrated soil and water management and the programme to combat desertification.
- Place greater emphasis on participative approaches to management and promoting the role of women in this process.
- Take into consideration, in such activities, specific technical and socio-economic aspects of production systems in areas that rely on rain-fed farming, looking in particular at the risks associated with soil erosion and desertification and the loss of biodiversity in agricultural and natural ecosystems across the Mediterranean region.
- Promote a study on climate change and water requirements in the Mediterranean, together with the way these factors impact on Mediterranean production methods.
- Include implementation of these activities in the regional programme of short- and medium-term environmental measures programmed for 2004. In addition, the recently launched regional programme for local water management could finance specific workshops on local water management for farming purposes under the schemes it is already funding. The regional Euro-Mediterranean water network could also contribute with its experience in this process.

b) To promote quality of agricultural products

- Improve knowledge of legislation in the Community and in the Mediterranean partner countries concerning desi-

gnations of origin and geographical indications, with a view to laying down identical or equivalent standards for current or future designations, protection and monitoring, in order to ensure conformity to the TRIPs agreements as well as their promotion internationally.

- Define an action plan for joint research on new issues, such as labelling and the use of specific logos, the setting of minimum packaging conditions in the area, traceability and controls.
- Study the possibility of creating a network of experts responsible for the sector in the EC countries and the non-Community Mediterranean countries. The network should serve as a forum for sharing information at an early stage on changes to existing regimes in the area, in order to promote coordinated action.
- Envisage action in the areas of processing and marketing in order to maximise profits on typical Mediterranean products. Such action should consist of identifying and promoting specific food products, as well as initiatives to maximise the profitability of high-quality PDO and PGI agricultural products, promote food safety and consumer protection.
- Extend certain partnership initiatives between businessmen on both sides of the Mediterranean, with a view to ensuring complementarity between the production systems, introducing common standards, improving product quality and integrating the agri-food sectors, based on the positive experience of the Italian "Green Corridors".
- Promote the quest for and the introduction of rules on the identification of high-quality food products from the region, and the use of logos to identify such products; build partnerships between businesses in the region that wish to promote typical Mediterranean foodstuffs and which share the same views on the quality-management and traceability policies that must accompany such strategies.
- With a view to implementing the above measures, carry out activities under the regional Euro-Med Market programme which encourage experience sharing and cooperation between administrations in order to harmonise and align systems of rules, including plant-health and agri-food standards. Cooperation in the field of quality and standards should lead to the progressive implementation of a more consistent set of rules and standards that will facilitate specialisation, trade and exports on the part of our partners in a number of market segments with high growth potential.

c) To initiate actions in the field of organic farming

- Organise an information seminar to present the Community's legislation in this field, together with the Community procedure for recognising equivalence of organic products from non-Community countries so as to promote exports of such products to the Community; this would also be an opportunity for our Mediterranean partners to present their own legislation on organic farming.
- After the seminar, set up a network of competent experts or institutions active in the field in both Community and non-member countries of the Mediterranean basin. The network should serve as a forum for sharing information, at an early stage, on changes to existing regimes in the area, in order to promote coordinated action and the development of the organic sector in all these aspects.
- Promote participation by non-Community Mediterranean countries in trade fairs for organic products.
- As in the case of actions in the area of designations of origin and geographical indications, implement the above measures through financing under the regional Euro-Med Market programme.