

## NOTES

# Food security in the Mediterranean: An economic and political challenge

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The Mediterranean region is facing complex global and regional challenges such as the increasing severity of climate change, declining food security, growing dependence on international markets, increasing water scarcity, the ongoing degradation of soils and biodiversity, and, finally, geopolitical uncertainties.

Food dependence levels in South-East Mediterranean Countries (SEMCs) are around 50%, with a rising volume of imports, particularly of cereals. In fact, with 6% of the world's population, the region accounts for 15% of global cereal imports and 30% of world wheat imports.

The population is growing at an average rate of 1.5% in the last 20 years, leading to an increase in food demand.

In parallel, the region has experienced a marked urbanization trend, with urban growth increasing by 270% over the past four decades. This process has been accompanied by a decline in the rural population, leading to a reduction in agricultural supply and the abandonment of less fertile lands. The region is also undergoing sustained economic growth, which has contributed to a rise in food availability—from 2,700 kcal per capita in 1990 to 3,300 kcal in 2023. However, the expansion of the middle class has fostered a significant dietary transition: from a traditional, seasonal diet rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables to a more standardized, 'Westernized' dietary pattern.

Consequently, malnutrition rates have increased, affecting approximately 8% of the population in SEMCs, while 35% of adults are classified as overweight.

Another consequence of full integration into international markets is price volatility, as observed over the past ten years. This has generated significant market instability, with major repercussions on farmers' incomes, consumers' purchasing capacity, and has exacerbated the difficulties of access to food for the most vulnerable population groups, as well as placing additional pressure on public budgets.

The heavy reliance on external markets, the fragility of production structures, the volatility and rising prices of food commodities, and the limited availability of resources that characterize the reality of the Southern Mediterranean contribute to increasing levels of vulnerability and the risk of food insecurity, with implications for social stability and the sustainability of production systems.

We can therefore state that the current modes of food consumption and production are not sustainable in the Mediterranean basin, and this issue extends beyond the region itself.

According to the FAO's definition of food security — whereby all individuals, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food — several critical challenges can be identified within the current food system model in the SEMCs, in particular:

#### *Availability*

- Increasing dependence on international markets;
- Rising food demand driven by population growth combined with the scarcity of land and water resources;
- Pressure on natural resource consumption, resulting in the depletion of basic natural resources and biodiversity loss.

#### *Accessibility*

- Limited access for small-scale farmers to distribution channels and growing distances between producers and consumers;
- Distortion of mechanisms governing the “food environment”;
- Decline and inequality in consumers' purchasing power.

#### *Utilization*

- Homogenization of diets;
- Increased production of calorie-dense but nutrient-poor foods;
- Rising levels of malnutrition and overweight.

### **Local economies: a support for food sovereignty**

A shift in the organizational and developmental model of the food system must be considered. Such a shift, even if only partial and complementary to the mechanisms of globalized international markets, could be embodied in the concept of food sovereignty. This concept should not be understood as a simple protection of national production, but rather as a strategy aimed at strengthening stable national or regional trade relations capable of combining both quantity and quality in raw materials and finished products.

More concretely, this should lead to a rethinking of resource use — for example, by reclaiming unused land, scaling up the dissemination of agroecological practices, and increasing the use of renewable energy. Ideally, it would also help address issues related to value distribution along supply chains. This includes promoting disintermediation systems capable of interacting with distribution networks, thereby supporting an evolution of supply that is more responsive to new market demands in terms of sustainability and equity.

In the face of recent developments related to the ecological transition and the food and energy crises, the issue of territorial and local economies as a strategy for development and territorial regeneration — in response to the shortcomings of economic globalization — has returned to the center of public debate.

Current production paradigms must be transformed to move beyond the perception of nature as a mere economic resource. This requires introducing alternative models to traditional business models, embracing cooperative logics in which territorial embeddedness, the recovery of traditional production, and a focus on sustainable practices become key drivers of innovation and change within local farming communities.

The aim is to identify alternative models to the dominant approach, based on social innovation — models that enable a reterritorialization of development, transforming and regenerating territorial ecosystems. Within such models, all actors, including those on the demand side, can engage in meaningful and value-generating participation.

Local economies draw inspiration from these new models of development and territorial value creation, particularly by recognizing the territory as a contextual space of production and purchasing/consumption.

This leads to a more complex form of organization and development based on interactions between enterprises, the territory, and the broader socio-cultural and institutional context. It is a production system that is deeply embedded in the territory, enhancing both productive and cultural biodiversity rooted in tradition, productive specialization, and agricultural vocation.

This development model must be founded on innovative planning, aimed at achieving a new dynamic balance between economic growth and the valorisation of local resources. It requires the active involvement of public institutions and the implementation of integrated planning based on strengthening infrastructure and fostering technological innovation.

Such an approach implies considering the socio-political dimension, not merely relying on the logic of the global economy. This means:

- Prioritizing local and national economies and markets;
- Supporting family farming;
- Promoting food production, distribution, and consumption based on environmental, social, and economic sustainability;
- Embedding stronger ethical and social values into food systems;
- Encouraging resilient agricultural practices that enhance productivity and production through agricultural vocation and the creation of shared value among different stakeholders.