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Food security in the Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf regions – trends and challenges

The Mediterranean and Gulf regions are facing different challenges related to food security, among which the effects of climate change, desertification, water scarcity and overexploitation of natural resources, population growth, rural employment decline, agro-biodiversity loss, food waste and losses, just to name a few.

The priorities outlined by researchers and experts, such as water management, climate change mitigation, the use of pesticides, sustainable agricultural techniques, seem to be only part of the solution, because they must be accompanied by stable political and economic frameworks, in order to guarantee the effectiveness of the policies implemented.

Marked urbanization and the increasing population density on coastal areas are causing social and economic disparity between urban and rural areas populations. Spikes in prices of food commodities, such as cereals and sugar, combined with water shortage, represent a major threat to political stability in the region. In fact, food insecurity can easily lead to social and political turbulences. As recent events have demonstrated, scarcity and sharp spikes in staple food prices could trigger social unrest and violence, including food riots, anti-government demonstrations, and an array of anti-social behaviour. There are a wide range of examples from last years that point at this risk. For instance, food shortages and rise in prices, appear to have contributed as stressors to the Arab Spring. In particular, the severe drought Syria experienced from 2006 to 2011 made resources scarce and contributed to the kick-off of the Syrian civil strife, as we know it today. Hence, there are plenty of reasons why the safeguard of well-functioning agri-food production systems is a key goal in the Euro-Mediterranean area.

Considering the strict correlation that ties access to food to political and social stability in the context of the coronavirus crisis, it appears clear that a decrease in food supply and/or speculation on food commodities (very common in these situations i.e. during the Ebola outbreak, food prices increased up to 150% in affected areas) may have exacerbated the epidemic and caused further instability. There was indeed very high risk that measures adopted by governments to curb the virus spread, together with market disturbances due to lockdowns and panic buying, could disrupt food supply chains, reason for which PAM shared with its members a set of strategic recommendations from the UN to mitigate such risk. Fortunately, thanks to the early warnings, as of April 2020, the disruption recorded had been minimal

Resilience to crisis and tensions is undoubtedly a fundamental aspect of a well-functioning food production system. Nonetheless, according to WFP, there are some countries in the PAM region that are still exposed to the risk of market shock, such as Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Palestine, and Syria. Even in countries from the Northern shore, governments had to adopt urgent measure to ensure

free access to food at the onset of the crisis for the most socially vulnerable segment of the population, as was the case in Southern Italy.

The many national and international institutions with which PAM collaborate have provided the Assembly with high-level expertise, up-to-date information on the challenges ahead and strategic guidelines to be adopted or taken into consideration by national parliaments for their deliberations. Quoting FAO, “policy makers are grappling with uncertainties surrounding the impacts of COVID-19 on food supply, demand and trade, and identifying the most appropriate measures to ensure that this pandemic does not translate into a food crisis”. For this reason, the UN laid down a series of recommendation with regards to policy objectives in time of food and health crisis, which have proven essential to advise PAM MPs (i.e. avoiding trade-restrictive measures, enhance market transparency and coordination with all concerned actors, address actual rather than perceived disruption). COVID 19 was also instrumental in recalling that policy responses, typically adopted to deal with such disruptions, can sometimes aggravate the situations and exacerbate their market impacts if not tailored, as it was the case in the 2007-2008 global food price crisis. The European Union, on its side, also contributed to the international effort by presenting, at the end of April, a package of initiatives to protect food supply chain during this crisis and in its immediate aftermath (the perseverance of the EU Single Market being considered of paramount importance).

In the framework of PAM efforts, parliamentarians, through their legislative and oversight functions, as well as their role as natural bridge between the citizens and the government, have played their part in responding to the pandemic and in ensuring that governments properly address food security at the national level. On a regional level, PAM as a platform has assisted, in cooperation with the UN, in identifying and sharing best practices and lessons learned. Moreover, PAM will continue to foster cooperation among its member parliaments and actively support their efforts in these regards in order to promote national legislative frameworks that are harmonised and coherent at the regional level.

PAM strategy also aims at contributing to global efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals, in particular the objective to end hunger by 2030 in neighbouring countries, as food security in the Sahel is critical to the Mediterranean itself. The Agenda 2030 also help to realize how today’s main global challenges cannot be addressed in isolation. Sustainable integrated management of water, use of alternative water resources, technologies and governance models are key to achieve this goal.

In particular, it is important that the agri-food sector and food production in general adapt to climate change and associated expanding drought, warming and extreme events, while developing sustainable and productive agro-ecosystems, preventing the emergence of animal and plant diseases, developing farming systems able to generate income, to create employment and contribute to a balanced territorial development.

PAM sustains a series on initiative devoted to the environment, so to mitigate effects of climate change and desertification, as major contributors to food insecurity. PAM believes that a coherent regional legislative action in this regard is crucial as, at the same time, for food security the approach needs to be multi-faceted. Improvements are indeed necessary not only in legislation, but also in education and research, as proven by the model PAM collaboration with research centres and

universities in the PRIMA project for the promotion of sustainable food systems in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Moreover, within the framework of its Academic Platform, PAM, the University of Turin and the Université Côte d'Azur of Nice, have initiated a new joint project proposal for the promotion of sustainable food systems in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The project, to be funded by the European Union, will offer a dedicated double Master's degree and a PAM Advanced Training School for directors and experts, on food production, transformation and marketing in the Euro-Mediterranean region, including the topics of the right to sustainable health, food for all, and sustainable food production. This Training school will bring together PAM MPs, UN, EU and private sector experts to forge innovative mechanisms of good governance and decision making processes to harmonize the legislative framework within the Euro-Mediterranean region, such as to foster public cross-border and regional food policies, discuss common threats and share best practices to achieve adequate sustainable solutions to the pressing challenges on sustainable food in the region.

For the Mediterranean region, solid, resilient and sustainable Agri-food industry is fundamental. Economic relevance represents the tip of a structural pyramid composed of several levels. In fact, Agri-food is more than of high revenue or market share of the sector within the economic systems of the countries composing the Euro-Mediterranean region (although still important), but more aspects play a critical role when dealing with food security.

Quantity and quality of agriculture goods, together with their position in global trade, are indeed essential within an extensive macro- and cross-sectorial vision. For instance, tourism in the Mediterranean basin is strongly linked to food excellency. Countries such as Italy, France, Spain, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco welcome every year millions of tourists from all over the globe attracted by the beauty of the natural landscape and cultural heritage of the Euro-Mediterranean region, and also (sometimes, especially) to taste locally produced culinary delicatessen and wines.

Moreover, the Mediterranean diet is among the healthiest way of eating, as it has been proved to decrease chances to develop conditions, such as diabetes and heart diseases. It is therefore possible to mention that there is a proper "culture of food", which unites all the countries of the Mediterranean region and contributes to the wellbeing of its populations and attractiveness to the rest of the world.

PAM considers it essential to develop a shared strategy and common standards for the future of the Euro-Med food supply chain, in consideration of the detrimental effects that food insecurity can have in regards to economic, political and social stability and health of entire regions.

The Euro Mediterranean region has faced similar threats before, and surely it will come out stronger and more experienced. Parliamentarians have learned from past events and now are more familiar with the initiatives needed to direct national and regional efforts and investments to tackle effectively the threats posed to the Agri-food sector.

First, and foremost, in line with what suggested by the key global actors, transnational and a barrier-free trade needs to be ensured, loosening restrictive regulations.

Secondly, measures aimed at control prices and governmental incentives and private investments, particularly in infrastructure to enable the distribution of food, as forms to support the most affected businesses, are as well essential to avoid social turmoil.

Thirdly, innovation is considered as a priority. This includes a progressive digitalization of the food industry under the name of Smart Agri-food, and Agriculture 4.0 can address existing weaknesses and maximize the potential of the sector; investments directed at modernize the food supply chain (namely on Agri-logistics; optimization of fertilizer, fuels, pesticide and water use; information and decision support systems integrated with advanced internet-based services) can indeed enhance sustainability, both environmental and economic, efficiency, awareness, quality and security of products.

Fourth, it is important to valorise the food products from the traditional Mediterranean diet, innovate the traditional food and promoting healthy consumption habits, awareness, and appreciation, particularly among younger generations, about their own cultural food heritage.

Finally, another aspect of the pandemic has been a sudden reduction in labour force of the Agri-food sector, due to the closure of borders. A possible response, advanced by Italy, France and Finland, is to allow foreign workers to resume their work: in fact, in this regard, Italy's agriculture minister recently proposed to regularize nearly 500,000 undocumented foreign workers so that they could operate immediately and legally, for seasonal farm work picking crops this year, as no other workforce would be available.