

RURAL AREAS

80% of land to the South and East has been undermined by desertification

For several decades the Mediterranean rural areas have been witnessing considerable change. The growing divide between the hinterland and the heavily developed plains, between rural and urban areas, the over-exploitation of resources, environmental and landscape degradation, increased food and/or energy dependency are the main symptoms of a tricky situation.

And the situation could get even worse if the agricultural trade liberalisation currently being negotiated were not to be accompanied by the requisite national and regional legislative and policy provisions.

- ✓ In the North, the farming population shrank by 74% in 40 years (1960-2000). To the South and East, it rose from 61 million to 71 over the same period (+16%)
- ✓ 21% of farmed land i.e. 26 million hectares are under irrigation in 2005, which means that the surface area has doubled in less than 40 years, and is on a steady upward trend.
- ✓ A constant deficit in the trade balance in practically all the SEMCs and the importance taken on by cereals (22% of world imports in 2004) and a negative balance to the North (if the non-Mediterranean French part is left out)
- ✓ 80% of arid and dry farmland is affected by desertification in the South and East, 63% in the North
- ✓ 42% **afforestation** in the North, – 4.7 in the South and East. An identical 0.4% annual average growth in forests (1990-2000), and outbreaks of fire on the increase.

Agriculture in the Mediterranean is still essentially pluvial with a marked sylvo-pastoral vocation, which means that its activities are particularly vulnerable to summer drought and variable rainfall. Climate change is likely to affect in an equally crucial manner both nature areas (pastureland, wooded areas and protected parks) and biodiversity, the exceptional wealth of which reaches endemic levels of over 20%.

The diversity of the environment and the constraints upon it (limited availability of fertile, watered land, drought and irregular rainfall, a steep relief...) is what lies behind the great variety of landscapes and farming societies which have developed production systems which over the centuries have adapted to their sometimes harsh and always fragile environment. The results of these anthropogenic activities have now become an integral part of the rural areas.

With population growth, agriculture becoming more intensified, competition between areas and delays in sometimes ill-adapted rural development programmes, natural resources are subject to considerable pressure, resulting in water becoming more scarce and polluted, deforestation, erosion, the risk of desertification and the irreversible loss of biodiversity.

The trend scenario is based on four hypotheses: the liberalisation of reciprocal but progressive agricultural trade between the various shores; a common agricultural policy extended only to the new countries acceding to the EU; the emergence of highly technological and capital-intensive « precision » agriculture to the North; the inadequacy of sustainable development policies, which actually take little account of the threats of climate change.

The risks would be an increase in rural poverty in the South and East, a massive exodus towards the rapidly growing towns with the ensuing loss of more than 1.5 million hectares of land to urbanisation, the over-exploitation and degradation of water and land resources, the threat of a food crisis with the decline of the Mediterranean diet and growing regional dependency on world markets.

Moreover, global warming of 2°C by 2100 would have serious consequences for agriculture in the Mediterranean, with a worsening of the water deficit and a drop in agricultural productivity. Globally speaking, the climate change process could entail a northwards shift of bioclimatic levels: part of Southern Europe could become unsuitable for commercial cereal production and vegetable production could run into difficulties.

Reducing rural poverty, revitalising the hinterland, developing domestic and international markets, safeguarding environmental public property and maintaining social cohesion require sustainable rural development strategies and policies.

The Blue Plan's alternative scenario involves first and foremost protecting peri-urban farming land, potentialising agricultural products (from processing through to market access via quality control) and support for producer organisation, developing the local areas and redistributing the results of growth in international and domestic demand for typical and organic products and rural tourism, building up service centres in the rural areas, enhancing political recognition for the multiple roles of agriculture and the Mediterranean forests, and bringing in innovatory sustainable rural development policies in the South and East. These will prompt the administration to switch to a culture of local and participatory governance.

If this scenario is to be a success, sustainable rural development objectives will need to be included in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and support extended to the agricultural and rural development of the South and East, in conjunction with decentralised cooperation programmes. The promotion of the Mediterranean diet, which has already been got underway by the WHO and the Anglo-Saxon countries in an attempt to limit the growing social cost of cardio-vascular disease and some forms of cancer, is becoming an important objective in regional cooperation.

Finally, faced with the threat of climate change, the adaptation strategy issue is becoming crucial, with measures such as improving water demand management and soil protection, developing potential sources of water and changing cropping practices.