

## Food Security for Human Security in the Mediterranean

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### Introduction

Food security is an issue of critical importance for the Mediterranean region, and therefore has always been a priority for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM).

PAM is an international organization that brings together the parliaments of 27 member states in the Mediterranean region on an equal footing, along with a number of associate and partner countries. Through its work, PAM strives towards the creation of the best political, social, economic and cultural environment and conditions for the fellow citizens of the member states. It carries out its work through its three Standing Committees (SCs): 1<sup>st</sup> SC on Political and Security Related Cooperation, 2<sup>nd</sup> Standing Committee on Economic, Social, and Environmental Cooperation, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Standing Committee on Dialogue amongst Civilizations and Human Rights.

Food security represents a major issue for the entire world, because we need to feed a constantly increasing population by using the available soil. In this context, it may be worth noting that, at the global level, the issue is gaining momentum: the theme of the EXPO 2015, the Universal Exhibition hosted by the city of Milan in Italy, is self-explanatory about the priorities for the whole planet.

### A multi-faceted issue

The relevance of food security is also critical in the wider domain of security. Beyond the purpose of avoiding humanitarian disasters such as famine, ensuring that populations have adequate access to food, at stable prices, is an essential factor to ensure national security. Indeed, food security directly affects the conditions of well-being and prosperity of entire populations, further constituting a potential threat to human security.

Food security is also a major concern for the Mediterranean region, due to ongoing climatic changes. Its geographical position is in fact conducive to an arid climate, susceptible to serious events, notably droughts. This region is particularly vulnerable to the phenomenon of climate change that is disrupting the environmental system of the Mediterranean, and has manifested itself with major extreme weather events that have caused severe food shortages.

The link between environmental and economic factors in matters of food security is particularly relevant in the Mediterranean. The environmental vulnerability of this region must be added to the configuration of its economy. Many countries in the Mediterranean, especially in the Middle Eastern and North African region, are highly dependent on a rural economy based on agriculture. Such economic and geographical features make many populations dependent on food production for their own income. The high poverty rates also reveal that such populations spend a big part of their income on basic food supplies. Therefore, food security is key to the prosperity and development of this region.

### The critical connection with political stability

Due to its relevance and implications, food security is closely linked to political stability. Its determinant factors, that is to say climate change and the consequent fluctuations in food prices, act as stressors, which may intensify other grievances among the population. For instance, academics have identified a clear link between sharp increases in food prices and social unrest by comparing the UN Food Price Index with social unrest in the Mediterranean in 2008 and during the Arab Spring in 2011<sup>1</sup>. The spikes in food prices critically affect stability, leading to the outburst of cumulated grievances in the form of riots and political protests. This model reveals that the lack of food security was one of the stressor factors which helped trigger the Arab Spring.

The link between food security and instability can be observed by looking at the examples of Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria in the lead up to the Arab Spring. Many studies focus on the rural and agricultural roots of the revolutions that took place during the so-called Arab Spring.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://necsi.edu/research/social/foodcrises.html>

It is no coincidence that the events, which contributed to spark the protests in the whole region, originated in the North African country of Tunisia. The example of Tunisia indeed highlights the link between food security and political instability. As indicated by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index from January 2004 to May 2011, global markets were hit by severe fluctuations in food prices. The two peaks in prices of 2008 and 2011 also correspond to a surge in riots in 30 countries around the world, including Tunisia. Such fluctuations particularly affected the Tunisian population because of the restructuring of the agricultural sector, which had been undergoing in the years leading to the Arab Spring. The Tunisian economy had in fact been undergoing a process of liberalization starting from the 1980s, which strengthened export-based agricultural production, and turned Tunisia into a net importer of basic food supplies like grain. Global rises in food prices therefore impacted the Tunisian imports, thereby affecting the cost of staple foods, greatly consumed by rural families. In the protests of 2008 and 2011, food security indeed constituted a precipitating factor for social unrest. The lack of stable price levels and the restructuring of the Tunisian agricultural can be considered as significant factors in the prompting of the political instability<sup>2</sup>.

Egypt is another case in point. Similar to the Tunisian example, the issue of food security might raise serious concerns due to its potential impact on national security. During the years preceding the widespread uprisings of the Arab Spring, shortages in the supplies of subsidized bread conducted to riots and demonstrations. The 2007 bread riots are indicative of the negative consequences that the heavy dependence on imported wheat provokes<sup>3</sup>. Like Tunisia, Egypt is a net importer of wheat (Egyptian wheat is low in gluten and therefore needs to be mixed with imported wheat to make bread) and, as a consequence, its economy suffers from the fluctuations in global food prices. Both the social unrest of 2007 and the 2011 mobilization of Tahrir Square in the midst of the Arab Spring, reveal the role played by food price fluctuations and food insecurity in escalating the disaffection of the Egyptian people with regards to the Mubarak regime. In addition, the country faces a loss of arable land at an estimated rate of 11,700 hectares per year due to desertification.

As identified in a study of the Columbia University, the Syrian example proves the fragility of the Mediterranean region in the face of climate change, and its consequences on national security. Between 2006 and 2010, Syria experienced one of the worst droughts in its modern history. Small farming operations were affected the most, and as a result of this, around 1.5 million people were internally displaced. The movement of people from the rural farmlands to the big cities of Syria in search for work often proved unsuccessful, and many of them faced abject poverty<sup>4</sup>.

The government's policies in regards to subsidies for water-intensive crops and bad irrigation techniques did not help addressing this situation, but perhaps even contributed to the growing dissatisfaction of the Syrian farming community with the government<sup>5</sup>. Unlike other Arab Spring movements, which started in major cities, the Syrian Arab Spring began in Da'ara, which is an agricultural hub. The areas which were affected the most by the drought were in the North Eastern parts of the country, which now hosts the self-declared Islamic State. We must not ignore the fact that climate change may have played a role in the unfolding of events in Syria, contributing to a wide array of consequences, including security threats.

### **PAM activities on food security**

In order to work towards food security it is important to take both preventative and conservatory measures to environmental factors that may destabilise food production or access, as well as to have a comprehensive strategy to achieve this goal. Food security is closely dependent on effective trade policy, sustainable farming practices, water security, sustainable irrigation techniques, and proper waste management. Although various levels of government and the private sector are involved in these areas, all effective action starts with good policies and the right legislation. This is why the role of lawmakers is very important on a national level, as well as on an international level, to ensure the proper exchange of good practices, effective approaches, innovative ideas, experiences, as well as international cooperation to ensure food security on a regional level.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean has tackled food security issues from several perspectives. The 2<sup>nd</sup> PAM Standing Committee regularly produces reports and resolutions on pressing issues, which are adopted annually at the PAM Plenary Sessions, and in 2012, Food Security was one of the key topics addressed in the adopted documents. Food Security in the Mediterranean region is closely linked to issues of "climate change and management of water resources". These are also two topics of high priority for PAM, which has adopted reports and resolutions dedicated to environment and climate change every year since the establishment of the Assembly, and on the issue of water resource management in the region in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ijsaf.org/archive/19/2/gana.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/conferences/2011-edia/papers/711-berazneva.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Peter H. Gleick, 2014: Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria. *Wea. Climate Soc.*, 6, 331-340.  
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-13-00059.1>

<sup>5</sup> Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell, Climate Change Before and After the Arab Awakening: The Cases of Syria and Libya, <http://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/climatechangeandspring-ccs-cap-stimson.pdf>

In 2010, the PAM Second Standing Committee established the PAM Panel on Trade and Investments in the Mediterranean, which serves as a link between regional parliamentarians and leaders from the private sector. The PAM Panel has been very active on various issues, such as food security, where cooperation between the private and public spheres is essential.

### The value of cooperation at the international level

Aware of the importance of international cooperation as an instrument to join efforts in facing common challenges, PAM has developed excellent cooperation, on the issue of food security, with key regional actors such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). In 2011, PAM Vice-President Sen. Amoruso addressed the meeting of the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs of PACE, highlighting that food scarcity and speculation on food commodities, are factors which have played a role in destabilization of the southern Mediterranean region.

PAM has strong relations with UNESCO, and the two organizations cooperate on a variety of issues. In 2012, PAM and UNESCO co-organized the *International workshop on knowledge and policies for health security, climate change effects mitigation and the Mediterranean environmental transition*, which was held in Turin, Italy. Two separate sessions focused on *Food Safety, Food Security, and environmental sustainability: the case of the Mediterranean Diet* and *Food Security, Environmental Migrations and Urban Sustainability*.

In addition PAM, as an observer member of the UN, enjoys excellent relations with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP), and most notably the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). FAO regularly participates and contributes to the activities of PAM and its Panel. For instance, in 2011, the Assistant Director General of FAO, Mr. Laurent Thomas delivered a key note speech at the PAM meeting of the Standing Committees, in Palermo. During his address, Mr. Thomas urged member states to use PAM as a platform for developing cooperation and solidarity strategies in the event of food shortages. In 2015, PAM has formally requested to become an observer at the FAO, in order to formalize and structure the existing cooperation.

Most recently, PAM tackled the issue of food security at the 2nd SDSN Mediterranean Conference: "Solutions for Agri-food Sustainability in the Mediterranean". This event, organised by the University of Siena under the auspices of PAM, was an initiative sponsored by the UN SDSN Mediterranean and the Region of Tuscany (Italy). PAM contributed at the event, underlining that food security requires a legislative, educational and research approach by all stakeholders.

The cooperation with the UN System will also be related to the UN post-2015 development agenda and the new Sustainable Development Goals, which will be adopted in New York in September.

PAM also addressed the Private Sector Forum on Food Security in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Region organised in Barcelona, on 5-6 May 2015, by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The Barcelona event represented an opportunity to underline the importance for PAM to work with all the major actors on the food security issue, as well as relevant stakeholders from both the public and the private sectors, in order to provide legislative support for sustainable agriculture solutions on a national level, and to increase policy harmonization on the regional level to achieve comprehensive food security for all the people of the Mediterranean region.

Food Security was one of the main topics of the meeting "Science, technology and environment: waste management and food security", held by PAM in Milan on 11 June 2015. A session of the event was dedicated to the "Use of organic waste for Food Security and Environment". On that occasion, the importance of using organic waste in order to produce organic nutrients for the soil was repeatedly stressed, due to the crucial role played by the soil organic matter (SOM) in increasing the productivity of the soil.

PAM considers the CIHEAM as an essential interlocutor for contributing to the challenges faced by food security in the region. Therefore it is the intention of PAM to deepen its relations with the CIHEAM in order to establish a structured and mutually beneficial relation between the two institutions. The experts of the CIHEAM, particularly within the framework of activities of its Panel on Trade and Investments in the Mediterranean, could greatly contribute to the work of the Mediterranean parliamentarians, who want to play a primary role in supporting food security through their legislative activity at national and regional level.

