

Sustaining societies and agriculture

Fatima El Hadad-Gauthier, Michel Petit, Samir Mili, Etienne Montaigne and José-Maria Garcia Alvarez Coque explain how the continued prosperity of the Mediterranean region rests on a dual policy approach to sustainability that is environmental and economic

SUSTAINMED



Can you begin by highlighting the context from which your research project emerged and the main aims of SUSTAINMED?

Following on from MEDFROL and EUMED AGPOL – two parallel projects focused on the potential negative impacts of Euro-Med trade liberalisation on European agriculture – SUSTAINMED is analysing the impact of public policies, including trade liberalisation, on Mediterranean partner countries (MPCs). Indeed, the stakes of trade liberalisation for these countries are much greater than for European Member States. Hence, the purpose of SUSTAINMED is quite comprehensive: to explore in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries the impacts on the three dimensions of sustainability (economic, social and environmental) of public policies affecting agriculture, including domestic policies and EU policies, notably trade liberalisation and neighbourhood policies.

How are you assessing the impacts of agricultural systems in MPCs?

The field research is conducted in three partner countries – Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia – as well as in Turkey. Originally,

Syria was included in the project but had to be dropped due to the civil unrest. Most of the research work relies on the collection of secondary data, review of literature (formal and informal), as well as primary data through interviews with key actors in selected value chains and expert judgements.

Could you explain what key impacts are being addressed and detail your methods for doing so?

Quantitative modelling and indicator-building are used in areas such as trade liberalisation, human development and sustainability. A prominent place is given to global value chain analysis and the role of public policies that target poverty alleviation, food security, trade liberalisation, environmental care and risk management.

To what extent do poverty alleviation, employment and migration trends form a part of your research?

Poverty alleviation, particularly in the rural context, is a key purpose of our project. It began with the selection of appropriate indicators of rural wellbeing and the examination of past trends for these

indicators. Similarly, employment and migration trends were considered at that stage. Subsequently, the emphasis has been on understanding the forces behind these trends and the analysis of the impacts of public policies on rural poverty.

Why is sustainability currently such a crucial focus in agricultural research? Can you give some insight into the key factors in ensuring sustainable food systems and rural development?

Sustainability has become a major focus of agricultural research worldwide for two converging sets of reasons: concerns for the deterioration of the natural resource base upon which agriculture relies; and the awareness that, in spite of major achievements in terms of increased agricultural production, many rural producers remain poor, particularly in developing countries. So, both environmental and social sustainability issues are very pressing. These concerns have particular urgency in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region, where the management of water resources will be particularly challenging. In addition, past public policies – although cognisant of rural poverty issues – did not tackle them forcefully enough.

Growing economies, reaping benefits

The complex relationships underlying the Mediterranean region make it particularly prone to the impacts of national and international policy decisions. **SUSTAINMED** aims to bring together partner countries in seeking policy solutions to benefit people, places and prospects for the future

Ensuring food security as the world population increases is an important issue for many policy makers and researchers. How does this form an important part of your investigations?

The issue of how best to ensure food security at the national level has been the key question driving agricultural policies in all countries of the region for several decades. It is therefore crucial to our research project, and several tools are being used to clarify the stakes involved and estimate the potential impacts of diverse policy scenarios. These include mainly qualitative investigations of rural poverty and environmental sustainability indicators, interviews of key actors in selected value chains, as well as quantitative models to simulate the impact of trade liberalisation scenarios on specific countries.

How are you approaching the complexities of the individual countries in the Mediterranean? Are you still hoping to form a generalised understanding of agricultural development in the region?

The main research effort is carried out at country level, in collaboration with colleagues from national partner institutions, attempting to answer a jointly-agreed set of questions, and leading to country reports on the various issues addressed. An attempt is then made to make comparisons and draw lessons from these comparisons, giving rise to conclusions which could more thoroughly address the multiple demands of the countries involved in the project.

SIDI BOUZID – a town of 50,000 inhabitants – was a flashpoint in the events of Tunisia's political revolution in 2011. As a settlement heavily dependent on agriculture, events there attest to rural poverty remaining a major problem. While some progress has been made in alleviating the poverty gap, in many countries a rift very much remains between the prosperity of city dwellers and the relative poverty of their countryside counterparts. A new project is therefore aiming to provide new knowledge, expertise and operational instruments to policy makers and other stakeholders involved in policies related to the agricultural sector.

The issues facing each and all countries are varied and will require tailored solutions. For example, in Egypt, real expenditures per capita increased by 93 per cent in urban areas between 1975-2009, whereas it increased by 78 per cent in rural areas during the same period: a significant achievement, but a disparity which still needs to be addressed.

Since March 2010, the SUSTAINMED project – led by the Institut Agronomique Méditerranéen de Montpellier, France – has been exploring how EU and national agricultural, rural, environmental and trade policies in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region can have implications for citizens, economies and ecosystems.

The consortium – some 13 institutions strong – includes recognised researchers from a clutch of European institutions: IAM Montpellier and INRA (France), MAIChania (Greece), UP Valencia and CSIC Madrid (Spain) and UNINapoli (Italy). These partners are working alongside Akdeniz University (Turkey), ENA Meknes (Morocco), INA Tunis (Tunisia) and Zagazig University (Egypt). Two teams from Kent Business School (UK) and PTT Finland contribute specific skills in value chain analysis and sustainable agriculture and forestry. The consortium constitutes a powerful intellectual group with a strong scientific background and

experience in Mediterranean policy, market and institutional analysis.

Focusing on the Mediterranean partner countries (MPCs) – Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey – members of the consortium have been establishing clear aims in how the progress of recent years can be given another boost. Such advances remain inconsistent across nations and, through comparing and contrasting data from each, the research team hopes to give a fuller picture of the story so far, as well as a rich contextual basis for the further development of rural economic agricultural policies.

GROWING AWARENESS

The project utilises a wide range of complementary methods and analytical tools, including quantitative modelling, structured surveying, indicator building and qualitative data analysis, to gain a fuller understanding of policies and their impact. While issues of rural poverty may have been acknowledged in policy, it may be some time before their impact can be accurately assessed, as Professor Michel Petit – a senior member of the coordination team outlines: “Progress has been made in alleviating rural poverty over recent decades, but much remains to be done. New public policies have been adopted by some countries to address this issue, reflecting a growing awareness of the need to do so. It is still too soon to assess their effectiveness”.

The SUSTAINMED team will look at subjects ranging from the role of agricultural production systems in rural development to the assessment of international trade policies and food security and risk management. The project analyses a very broad range of impacts, from socioeconomic structural changes, employment and migration trends, income distribution and poverty alleviation, resource management, trade liberalisation, as well as commercial relations with major trade partners and competitiveness in international markets. Using this panoramic perspective, the

INTELLIGENCE

SUSTAINMED

OBJECTIVES

To examine and assess the impacts of EU and national agricultural, rural, environmental and trade policies in the Mediterranean partner countries.

KEY COLLABORATORS

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MICHEL PETIT began his career as an Agriculturalist at Ingénieur Agronome, Paris in 1958, and became an Economist after receiving his PhD from Michigan State University in 1964. In 1988 he became Director of the Agriculture and Rural Development department for the World Bank, where he then created and led a special unit supporting agricultural research. He subsequently returned to France in 1998 and became Professor of Agricultural Economics at the Institut National Agronomique Paris-Grignon, now Agro-Paristech. Petit is now associated with the Institut Agronomique Méditerranéen in Montpellier, France.



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researchers hope they can shed further light on why poverty, and particularly rural poverty, remains a major issue in all four countries.

KEY FINDINGS

The impacts of trade policies are diverse and contrasted; each situation needs to be analysed specifically. One such factor is socioeconomic and environmental sustainability indicators. These indicators were developed for European situations, so can not be applied in a straightforward manner in Southern Mediterranean countries. There, attention must be given to specific circumstances, particularly for the management of very scarce water resources. With many MPCs already on the brink of water and temperature crises, reconfiguring these indicators could be crucial in allowing policy makers to adapt to the shifting needs of people, agriculture and climates.

The project aims to look very specifically at the production of everyday foodstuffs such as oranges, tomatoes and dairy products, focusing on aspects such as production systems, certified production, problems of market accessibility, value addition opportunities and marketing channels, as well as endogenous development initiatives. Each of the countries involved has produced a report on their own agro-food policies; there are similar reports for Libya, Jordan and Lebanon, which were based on a uniform format distributed to all partners. In addressing EU-level policy, members of the research team believe a search for coherence between trade policy and development policies must take into account the common economic, human and cultural interests of northern European countries and MPCs.

FOOD SECURITY

SUSTAINMED aims to unite the MPCs and other countries in assessing food security and risk management, investigating such factors as the relationships between food price variability and food security. In addition, useful insights on the role of export crops, for instance in the citrus fruit sector, will be gained through an emphasis of the

investigations on whole value chains, a work programme led by Kent Business School.

Another core focus is identifying relevant factors to measure sustainable development in agriculture and forestry, beginning with an overview of previous work and political agreements in the EU and internationally. Through strong collective efforts between institutions, led by both PTT Finland and CSIC Madrid, it is hoped that the relevance of socioeconomic and environmental sustainability indicators developed for European situations, which is not straightforward in Southern Mediterranean countries, special attention is given to specific circumstances, particularly for the management of very scarce water resources.

The time may have come to re-examine the intellectual foundations of past and current policies

Similarly, the balance between creating a food supply that is economically viable for consumers and fair for regional farmers is a delicate one. It is hoped that efficacy can be achieved in international agreements and national rural development and climate change mitigation plans. As weather and climate change expose agriculture and those it provides for, the need for effective, responsive policy is more pressing than ever. With research events and meetings forthcoming in Morocco, Belgium and Greece, the group hopes that the discussion they yield will be rich: "The alleviation of rural poverty has become a major imperative for public policies in the region: the time may have come to re-examine the intellectual foundations of policies past and present," Petit concludes. "The agricultural sector should be one of the priority areas for policy, since it still plays a predominant role in the socioeconomic balance of societies and territories in the MPCs, as vividly demonstrated by the role of rural youth in the Tunisian 'Arab Spring'."

