

Rural Migrations and Mediterranean Agricultural Systems

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As a result of the global incorporation of local economies, the Mediterranean rural world is undergoing an intense 'modernization of its agricultural sector.' The spatial polarization and social differentiations such restructuring have generated entail dramatic implications in economic, social and territorial terms. Also pushed by an intense environmental change, these dynamics have greatly contributed to decreasing livelihood opportunities, boosting youth migration out of rural areas, in search of a more promising future in areas with higher economic potentials. This eventually results in agrarian worlds facing growing problems related to a rapidly declining and ageing rural population.

A major challenge for communities inhabiting rural areas in the Mediterranean's southern regions (MENA)¹ is to access productive land resources for agricultural purposes so as to provide food, income and employment for a fast-growing population. The situation is quite the opposite on the Euro-Mediterranean flanks (EUMed)², where low fertility rates and rural population decline pose serious problems related to demographic ageing, lack of agricultural workforce and generational renewal. This is the context for the ongoing rural migrations in the region and beyond - and policy making has to be informed accordingly.

Environmental Asymmetries and Changes

The Mediterranean is characterized by a relevant asymmetry between its northern and southern and eastern rims. In agro-ecological terms only 14% of land is suitable for agricultural production in the region, with averages of 34.4% for the northern EU Mediterranean countries and only 5% for countries in southern and eastern rims. The rest of the Mediterranean territory is classified as 15% rangeland, 8% forest/woodland and 63% either mountainous or semi-arid land with production constraints – also defined as 'marginal' territory. Agriculture in its many and diversified forms plays a major role for regional food security, national economies and income and employment at the local level. It ranks high on the agenda of all countries in the region. In this agro-ecological setting, intense environmental change is also playing a role in reshaping food production and the management of the rich but fragile natural resource base. The overlapping impacts of climate change dynamics and a growing human pressure have visibly different impacts on the diverse portions of the region.

The Mediterranean population has increased dramatically in the last four decades, today numbering around 500 million people. From a regional perspective, demographic trends present diverging patterns - between an ageing population in the Euro-Mediterranean³, and fast-growing population rates on the African and Asian shores⁴. Furthermore, economic and political crises in neighbouring regions have also triggered in-migration from

¹ Middle East and North Africa (MENA) comprises all countries facing the Mediterranean Sea on the southern and eastern shores, and beyond inland.

² EUMed mostly refers here to Spain, Italy and Greece, and southern France and Portugal to an extent.

³ The five EUMed countries ranking amongst the top 21 in the world (an average life expectancy at birth of over 80 for 2013, OECD data).

⁴ MENA is characterized by high fertility rates - 2.35% yearly growth as an average for the last four decades.

TABLE 12 Basic Data Differentiating the Mediterranean N/S Rims

	Rural population	Agriculture % GDP	Employment in agriculture	Agric. land per capita	Average population age	CC 2050 projections on rainfall reduction
MENA	40%	10%	20%	1.9 ha	below 30	27%
EUMed	20%	4%	5%	11.4 ha	above 40	4%

other areas of the globe to the Mediterranean, at the historical crossroads between three continents. Intense climate change⁵ also contributes to amplifying the vulnerability of rural livelihoods and the differentiation amongst communities whose natural resource endowment is historically different. Following a pattern that originated in its southern flanks, the region is becoming hotter and drier, with significant implications on the health of ecosystems, animals and people alike. These provide important challenges to resource management and governance patterns, with major consequences for the socio-economic, environmental and political settings.

This context provides the background for current mobility patterns as attested by the intensification of south-north and east-west migratory flows, towards the European flanks. This is nothing new to the region, which interfaces three continents and has traditionally been a crossroads for different flows of trade, cultures and people.

Two Agrarian Worlds Mirroring Each Other across the Sea

Recent evolutions in the African and Asian rims of the Mediterranean have therefore been characterized by high population growth in areas where capacities to produce food are limited by agro-ecological conditions in terms of fertile land and water availability. Despite consistent investments, most farming systems rely on rainfed production and agro-pastoralism. Most MENA countries are less than self-sufficient in agricultural commodities, with imports accounting for 25-50% of consumption, particularly for cereals, of which the region is the world's largest importer. Together with the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, MENA is classified among

the world's most food-insecure regions due to its reliance on food imports. As agriculture remains a main source of employment and income for a large number of communities, the MENA countryside is mostly resource-poor and labour-abundant. This results in the average farm size being small compared to the average household size, with limited pro-capita productivity rates. These factors leave the rural population particularly vulnerable to climatic and economic volatility.

The overlapping impacts of climate change dynamics and a growing human pressure have visibly different impacts on the diverse portions of the region

Overall, when looking at figures that interrelate population growth with the availability of agricultural resources, food security projections become an increasingly critical variable in the MENA, raising concerns over the differential between resources, production and demand. The recent socio-political tensions and civil conflicts that have ravaged the region in the last decade are somehow related to food security matters, and to the agrarian world more generally.

In such contexts, emigration increasingly represents a key component of livelihood strategies for many rural households. The phenomenon could be indicative of failures in the institutional and/or market domains, whereby agriculture does not provide for decent and sustainable livelihoods. It might also be conceived as an adaptive measure, providing the

⁵ The Mediterranean is considered the world's second region in terms of exposure to climate change impacts. Projections up to 2050 indicate an average reduction in rainfall of 4% in northern countries, and 27% in southern ones; drought events will become regular even on the EU shores, where every second year is predicted as potentially dry.

TABLE 13

The Proportion of Immigrants in the Agricultural Workforce throughout the Crisis (%)

	2008	2013
Italy	19.4	37
Spain	19.1	24
Greece	17.0	>50

Sources: Eurostat; National statistics; Caruso, Corrado, 2015 in Colucci, Gallo, 2015.

opportunity to ease the human pressure on a dwindling resource base and to alleviate rural unemployment. Emigrating might also represent a response to the collapse of traditional organizational and/or governance mechanisms due to the growing pressure of these processes (Nori, 2018).

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While the share of MENA population living in rural areas today is 40% as an average, it is only about 20%⁶ in EUMed countries. Rural populations in EU continues have declined and many rural communities are persistently socially and politically marginalized, despite major investment in 'European rural welfare' through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). As a central founding pillar of the Union, CAP finances account for about 40% of the overall EU budget. After decades focusing on enhancing productivity and output performances, this policy and its related funding have been reframed with a more multifunctional perspective. The document introducing the forthcoming reform scheduled for 2020 makes specific mention of generational renewal and the integration of migrant workforces as major areas of concern.

Despite lower population figures, higher agro-ecological potentials and conspicuous policy support, living and working in the countryside often represent unattractive options for European popula-

tions. The exodus of rural youth leads to demographic decline and ageing, triggering problems in terms of workforce availability and generational renewal for agricultural enterprises and rural villages alike. All in all, the labour force in agriculture is older than in any other sector of the EU economy. While the phenomenon is common throughout the Union, rates are particularly worrying in Euro-Mediterranean countries, where agriculture is losing 2-3% of its active population per year. Today only about 10% of farmers across the EUMed are younger than 35, less than half the percentage of those aged over 65. Portugal leads the group with 22.7% of its rural population in this age group, followed by Greece (21.4%), Spain (21.1%), Italy (20.9%) and France (20.8%). These figures lead to serious concerns about an increasingly ageing and dependent population in many rural areas, as a young workforce is critical for a healthy and vital countryside.

Territorial Reconfiguration

A key factor that has effectively helped to counterbalance the rural exodus in the EUMed is the significant proportion of migrants that have come to inhabit and operate in the countryside in recent decades. This inflow makes a significant contribution to tackling the social and economic mismatch of the labour markets by filling the gaps left by the national population (Kasimis, 2010). Today, in many parts of the EU, foreign workers – both legal and illegal – make up a huge portion of the agricultural labour force and a significant part of the rural population. In countries such as Spain and Italy, official data indicate that in 2015, immigrants constituted over one-third of the salaried workforce in agriculture. This pattern is likely to continue and accelerate in coming years.

⁶ From 1960 to 2011, the average share of the population living in rural areas dropped by almost 40 % to 22.7 % (simple average of all 15 countries), World Bank data.

The rural world has indeed proved itself to be a 'refuge' sector for migrants during harsh economic periods. Research shows that throughout the last decade, EU metropolitan areas have been less attractive to immigrants, as the crisis expelled a consistent workforce from the secondary and tertiary sectors (Colucci & Gallo, 2015). Green areas have instead provided easier chances for sources of basic livelihoods and employment opportunities for newcomers. The rural world, furthermore, offers degrees of non-visibility and informality that help to accommodate the precarious situation of many migrants. According to OECD, in 2012 in EU Mediterranean countries agriculture represents the main sector where migrants are recruited without a regular contract. These grey zones provide a breeding ground for illegal practices and harsh exploitation, with significant social cost⁷.

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The overrepresentation of immigrants is particularly visible in certain areas and sectors, and gives way to related phenomena of territorial reconfiguration and ethnic- and gender-based specialization, with distinct communities occupying specific ecological and productive rural niches. As has already been the case in the past, generational change is always accompanied by an ethnic one.

Migrations Contributing to Rural Resilience

Migrations play a primary role in reshaping rural landscapes and agrarian worlds in the Mediterra-

nean. Though emigration out of rural areas is a global phenomenon throughout history, the current drivers, pace and trajectories of this process raise emerging questions and challenges. The Mediterranean has shown itself to be a significant setting for exploring the interfaces of agriculture and rural development with migration studies.

People mobility carries important implications on both rims of the region, and both sides of the migratory process. In rural areas of origin, such as in parts of MENA, migration represents a key component of livelihood strategies for many rural households, as a way to expand, diversify or protect local livelihoods, as people seek opportunities to pursue better living conditions, diversify household resources and provide alternatives for employment and income. Research attests to the fact that in many rural areas remittances have overtaken agriculture as the main source of income and investment, and the exposure to different farming systems and agricultural techniques has represented a relevant development factor. In this way migration represents a considerable resilience factor for the livelihoods of rural communities and the development of areas of origin (Zuccotti et al., 2018).

While emigration of rural youth is also a current issue in the European rims, the EU countryside seems to be capitalizing, to an extent, on current migratory dynamics, by tapping *into* migrant arrivals to repopulate rural areas subject to abandonment and to provide workforces for an agricultural sector which is of little interest to local populations (Ortiz-Miranda et al., 2013; Corrado et al., 2016). For the EU countryside, intense immigration has definitely represented a key factor of resilience, as it has enabled many farms, rural villages and agricultural enterprises to stay alive and productive throughout the difficult times dictated by the crisis (Kasimis, 2010; Colucci, Gallo, 2015; Nori, 2016). The limited recognition of these contributions of the immigrant workforce, the grey dynamics concerning contractual relationships and the particularly scant prospects for socio-economic upgrade undermines the ability of the incoming population to contribute to the sustainable development of agriculture and rural development in areas of destination (Corrado et al., 2016).

⁷ As attested by the well-known cases of El Ejido, 2000 in Spain, Rosarno, 2010 and Ragusa, 2015 in Italy, or Manolada, 2013 in Greece – to mention but a few.

Need for a Coherent Policy Framework

The production of food and the management of the natural resource base represent two basic pillars of every civilization at any time in history. Today though, agriculture does not seem to provide decent livelihoods in many parts of the world, including in the Mediterranean. Increasing rates of poverty, unemployment, marginalization and socio-economic vulnerability affecting rural communities push local youth to emigrate in search of alternative living and working conditions.

A sustainable rural world and agricultural sector need to be attractive to a young, skilled and motivated workforce, as a dynamic and productive countryside is critical to ensure food production, healthy ecosystems and territorial integration

In spite of relevant public engagements in political as well as financial terms, rural areas and agricultural production systems remain marginalized. Rural out-migration and population decline trigger problems of demographic ageing, workforce availability and generational renewal in the countryside. From a regional perspective, this provides push and pull factors for ongoing population movements.

A sustainable rural world and agricultural sector need to be attractive to a young, skilled and motivated workforce, as a dynamic and productive countryside is critical to ensure food production, healthy ecosystems and territorial integration. A main starting point for forging consistent strate-

gies towards a more appropriate engagement in political and investment terms should consider an improved articulation of agricultural and rural development policies with those that pertain to other significant realms, such as trade, employment and, indeed, migration. This applies to reception and origin countries alike.

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