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Priority 4: Sustainable development of small rural communities in marginal areas

Lamberto Lamberti, Virginia Belsanti, Annarita Antonelli

Ciheim Bari, Italy

I – Rationale

The role of smallholders, who populate rural communities, in the fight against hunger and in contributing to food security is taking centre stage in all sustainable development strategies worldwide. Rural population globally accounts for 48% of the total population and this share includes 70% of those 1.4 billion poor, often belonging to the most vulnerable categories, in the developing countries (data from the World Bank and IFAD, 2011). Yet, small-scale producers offer great potential to feed the world population, in fact they already feed about 2.2 billion people (data provided by IFAD, 2009) and their role is considered increasingly important with respect to the population projection looking at the year 2050 when the world is expected to have 9 billion people (50% increase comparing to the year 2000).

International organizations like FAO, the World Bank, IFAD, and many foundations, organizations, associations engaged in the battle to secure food and fight poverty respecting the environment have continuously emphasized the crucial role played by small-scale producers in assuring a multi-dimensional development characterized by economic, social and environmental sustainability.

As stated by officials of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and other UN agencies, during a UN consultation held in Rome on 11 February 2013 on hunger, food security and nutrition “investing in the sustainable development of rural areas and in inclusive rural growth, with a focus on smallholder agriculture, is critical for global food security and to the whole post-2015 agenda”.

Development strategies are targeting the intensification of farming activities, intended as increased productivity and income, as food production represents the main source of income for the rural poor in the developing countries. Moreover, they are steering efforts for engaging a larger share of rural small-scale producers in non-farm activities to support more integrated local development processes, as the World Bank openly indicated in its World Development Report 2008 and has been reasserted in the recent reports of FAO (2012) and IFAD (2010) on food insecurity and rural poverty. This trend particularly affects those countries defined as “transforming”, where agriculture is no longer a source of economic growth, yet, the poor are mainly in rural areas. In the Middle East and North Africa 92% of the rural population lives in *transforming* countries.

However, development strategies have been held back by defective policies and institutional and markets arrangements failing to create an enabling and conducive environment for smallholders to act as properly fuelled engines of development, which will also have to face more challenges linked to climate change and natural resources scarcity and depletion (IFPRI, 2011).

Agricultural systems are becoming more complex, requiring a sustainable combination of inputs/assets, integration in and adjustment to the markets, a need-targeting mix of traditional knowledge and scientific research, and social equity (Herren, 2011). Supportive and enabling policy mechanisms, encouraging inclusive decision-making, adjusting the imperfect market

mechanisms in order to be equitable and efficient, are factors that contribute to sustainable development of small rural communities.

Through this work MAIB intends to contribute, in line with the current trends and approaches in agricultural and rural development, to highlight the need for reforming policies and tailored research focuses that can promote a sustainable development of rural communities where smallholders can be main actors, and elements such as the specificity of the geographical context, collaboration, collective action, partnership, capacity building are taken into major consideration.

II – Extended summary

Small rural communities are very important drivers of development and actors that can make development sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms. Current trends and strategies designed for sustainable rural development recognise the central role of smallholders in development dynamics and their crucial contribution in achieving food security. The present document intends to provide an outline of the current situation of rural smallholders in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries (SEMC), highlighting the importance that rural communities (RC) still have in the rural landscape of this area, for geographical, historical and cultural reasons, where agriculture still appears as being the main activity but suffers for land fragmentation, scarcity of resources like water, lack of rural services, climate vulnerability. The portrait continues with an identification of the major farming systems of the area, categorised according to similar socio-economic and institutional contexts, which reflect the complexity of rural livelihoods, the interdependence between on- and off-farm activities and rural-urban linkages and the need to adjust livelihoods strategies to lack of resources. It is shown that the main strategies for increasing income and growth are intensification of production and diversification, increasing off-farm activities and exit from agriculture.

It is stressed the multi-dimensional and cross-sectoral character of rural development that cannot have as the only focus the increase of agriculture productivity but has to encompass also social, cultural, political development and protection of the environment. This work continues recognising the importance played by governments facilitating sustainable development by providing public goods like rural infrastructures, extension services, credit, education, access to markets but also acknowledges the limits of its action in targeting the needs of rural communities because of lack of administrative coordination, conflicting priorities, reduced budgets. Hence the importance of local stakeholders, who through participation in decision-making and development processes, collective action, mobilisation of local resources can better respond to articulated priorities at local level. Decentralisation has played a major role in empowering local stakeholders but the process is still incomplete. There is still a need of improved policy design for favouring alternative and innovative institutional forms replacing the traditional ones, especially promoting and supporting the role of local formal and informal groups.

After this set of general considerations on the current state of small rural communities in the SEMCs, the document concludes addressing a number of challenges like demographic pressure, engagement in non-farms activities, climate change and degradation of natural resources, weak services in rural areas, gender issues and decentralisation process improvement, that should guide research in identifying some priority issues (creating knowledge on sustainable agriculture and Natural Resource Management, smallholder farming systems and technologies, local knowledge and institutions, value chains and non-farm sector development with added value for RC, supporting services for decentralization processes and RC empowerment) to investigate in order to provide an appropriate backup to policy makers in defining their policies. At the same time some policy needs are also addressed, for example the need for better definition and protection of land ownership rights, access to credit, insuring a better representation of smallholders in

political bodies at national and local level, better policies for enhancing smallholders capacities and opportunities (education, healthcare, infrastructures).

III – Aim and Scope

The present document aims to provide a framework for further discussions and investigation on how sustainable development of small rural communities in SEMC can contribute to food security, which can guide future policy design to better target the needs of those communities for supporting and promoting development process.

The specific objectives of this paper are to present the situation of small rural communities in the SEMC taking into consideration their geographical and social context, their farming systems, livelihoods strategies, political and institutional context, environmental, social and economic challenges, and what are the aspects that need additional research to provide a more target specific set of policies to address development and respond to the need of guaranteeing food security.



Figure 1. SEMC map. Source: *Mediterra 2009*

IV – Key messages

Population projected to reach 9 billion in 2050 poses a challenge to food security. Smallholders can contribute to decrease food insecurity.

Agriculture is still the main activity in rural communities but it needs proper investments to drive smallholders towards a reduction in poverty, raise of income and better food access, and, considering the complexity and diversified character of rural economies, it can also be the best way to promote engagement of rural people in non-farm activities.

Rural development has a multi-dimensional nature that encompasses economic, social, political and environmental sustainability. Smallholders need to take action and participate in all development processes.

Rural communities are confronted with multifaceted challenges and vulnerabilities, demographic, economic, social, environmental (climate change and natural resource degradation and depletion). A more context specific and participative research is needed and a more targeted set of policies need to be designed and followed by good governance involving innovative institutional arrangements and decentralisation.

V – State of the art

1. Rural communities in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region (SEM)

Rural communities are scattered throughout the landscape of rural territories. They can include clusters of farmers, pastoral groups, villages, small towns and hamlets (ISTAT, 2010). Their livelihoods are mainly built on natural resources use. Worldwide agriculture (that include farming, fishing, livestock breeding, forestry, etc.) is their dominant activity and they manage resources including cultivable lands, forests, rivers, rangeland, etc., to which they have open access or are commonly managed.

Farms usually are the main productive units, where plury-activities (on farm and off farm) are conducted with different degrees of combination of pursuits (such as farming, herding, hunting, gathering, handcrafting (e.g. weaving, carving), processing, petty trading, wage labour, providing transport services in order to satisfy different human needs (Chambers and Conway, 1991) and to cope with risk, seasonality and other vulnerability factors. Considering the specific location and size of rural communities, other non farm activities are conducted such as trading, masonry, carpentry tourism and hospitality services.

Rurality is still an important character of the Mediterranean basin. In the region in 2005 there were about 164 million rural dwellers and they are projected to increase by about 2 million by 2020 (Mediterra, 2008). The rural population in the southern and eastern part of the Mediterranean has reached 114 million in 2010 and is expected to reach 118 million in 2020. There is a disparity between the two banks of the Basin: in the North there will be a decline of 6 million rural inhabitants, while the rural dwellers of the south will increase by 8 million (almost exclusively in Egypt).

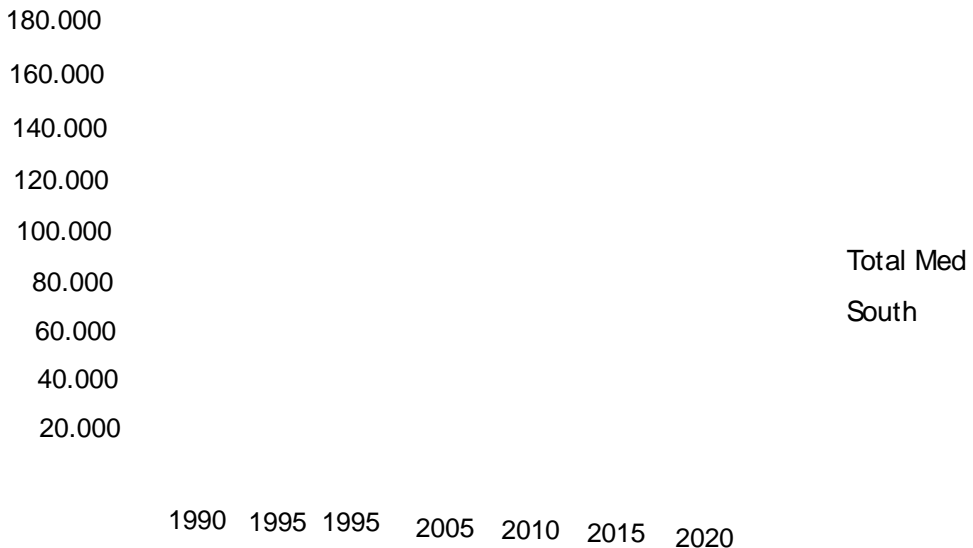


Figure 2. The rural population of the Mediterranean (.000)

Source: World Bank data

The area is characterised by a high level of heterogeneity in the landscape features and population density. While there is a concentration of communities along the coastlines, other communities are located in desert, mountain or steppe areas. This implies marked differences in the availability of resources, services, presence/lack of institutions and infrastructures, thus influencing the possibilities and pace of development of their livelihoods.

Agriculture is still the backbone of rural economy in the Mediterranean region, where countries like Albania, Egypt, Morocco and Turkey employ more than 20% of the population, with Albania and Morocco close to 30% and Egypt and Turkey close to 50% (EU Economic and Social Committee, 2011; Mediterra, 2009).

Family enterprises and smallholders are the main social unit in rural communities.

Box 1

Definition of small-scale producers

According to a definition given by FAO and IFAD (2012) "Small-scale producers refer to both women and men farmers, fishers, livestock producers, and forest users who produce on a small-scale for self-consumption and market (...) and who are relatively vulnerable to food insecurity due to limited resource endowments compared to other producers in the sector and similar economic, social and cultural contexts. Scale refers to farm size for farmers or to the amount of produce for fishers and forest users".

Households are the main source of labour. Productive activities tend to be gendered, with men typically involved in activities such as land preparation and hunting, and women dedicating their efforts to productive activities, such as gardening, food processing, petty trading, and reproductive tasks such as child care, water and wood collection, and cooking. Children can be involved in the practical activities of families either working with adults or alone.

Their farming commonly is characterized by low external inputs, diversifying, in time and space, species and genetic resources, integrating crops and livestock, harvesting water. These practices are knowledge intensive, based on techniques developed by small farmers' knowledge and experience (De Schutter, 2010). It is practiced on small size land, frequently marginal and/or fragmented.

Fragmentation of land has increased due to several factors such as uneven land ownership and land reforms, in cases like Albania, where 700 macro-farms were converted into 460.000 micro-farms (Mediterra, 2009).

While small farming is the main typology of rural farming, smallholders control the minority of the land and are often neglected by government policy approaches, which tend to favour more profitable commercial farms.

Table 1. Farm structure in Mediterranean countries

Morocco (1996)	2 millions of agricultural entrepreneurs, out of this 70% with less than 5 ha land size
Tunisia (2004-2005)	516.000 enterprises, out of this 53% with less than 5 ha
Algeria (2001)	1,2 million with farm average size of 4,7 ha
Egypt (2000)	3,7 millions of farms most of these under 2 ha size
Turkey (2000)	3 millions farms out of this ¾ under 5 ha
Albania (1996)	450.000 farms with an average size of 1,7 ha

Source: Mediterra 2009

Remoteness, fragmentation, and isolation limit opportunities for resource mobilisation and increase the cost and difficulty of providing rural goods and services effectively. Geographical marginality (physical distance from cities, coasts, difficult access, poor communication, and limited mobility) and physical constraints like in mountains and deserts, also involves interlocking social, economic and political factors that contribute further to differentiation and inequality of access to resources, information and opportunities. They can be grouped together as “market failures” (under-investment in those regions), “state failure” (inadequate infrastructures, enabling environment, basic services, social safety nets), and “social failure” (social exclusion and discrimination that occurs between and within social groups leading to insecurity, political instability and economic inequality) (Bird *et al.*, 2002).

Over the centuries rural populations in the SEMC area have adapted to the territorial constraints and adverse conditions, generating diversity in terms of social, cultural and biological characteristics. Local knowledge and institutional systems have given way to a plurality of approaches for the management of the local environment, as in the case of oasis dwellers who have managed the scarcity of water through skillful water distribution and management systems (Mediterra, 2009).

The complexity of rural livelihood strategies has been portrayed by the FAO and World Bank’s farming system approach, as an effort to suggest effective development interventions. A range of main farming systems has been identified, each grouping farms systems where households’ available resources and the socio-economic and institutional context are similar, as well as the interdependence between on- and off-farm activities and rural-urban linkages. After identifying 72 worldwide farming systems, 8 broader categories were defined:

Table 2. Categories of farming systems

-
- Irrigated farming systems, embracing a broad range of food and cash crop production;
 - Wetland rice based farming systems, dependent upon seasonal rains supplemented by irrigation;
 - Rainfed farming systems in humid areas, characterized by specific dominant crops or mixed crop-livestock systems;
 - Rainfed farming systems in steep and highland areas, which are often mixed crop-livestock systems;
 - Rainfed farming systems in dry or cold low potential areas, with mixed crop-livestock and pastoral systems merging into systems with very low current productivity or potential because of extreme aridity or cold;
 - Dualistic (mixed large commercial and small holders) farming systems, across a variety of ecologies and with diverse production patterns;
 - Coastal artisanal fishing systems, which often incorporate mixed farming elements; and
 - Urban based farming systems, typically focused on horticultural and livestock production.
-

Source: Farming systems and poverty, Dixon and Gulliver, 2001

A high percentage of rural households in the SEM region is represented by farmers and pastoralists. With reference to the previously mentioned identification of farming system categories by Dixon and Gulliver (2001, see tab. 2), in this region 6 main farming systems have been identified:

- *irrigated*, whose small-scale irrigation sub-systems represent a crucial factor in the livelihoods of smallholders in arid and remote mountain areas;
- *highland mixed*, where most of the rural communities are located having only 7% of the total land available, hence with a high poverty levels, distant markets, poor infrastructures and significant natural resources degradation;

- *rainfed mixed*, characterized by high population density (living on only 2% of the available land) and lower poverty rates thanks to off-farm income generating activities deriving from seasonal labour and migration;
- *dryland mixed*, with larger sized farms but higher risks of draught and strong food insecurity, where poverty is widespread among smallholders;
- *pastoral*, with sheep, goats but also some cattle and camels, It includes large areas of semiarid steppelands, and is characterised by low population densities, with more densely populated areas around irrigated settlements. They are linked to other farming systems through movement and sale of animals. Poverty is widespread;
- *coastal artisanal fishing*, artisanal fishermen living along the coasts combining income from the sale of fish with small-scale crop and livestock production. They are about 1 million people living on an area of around 11 million ha.

According to this categorization 5 main rural livelihoods strategies were identified, among which **intensification of existing production patterns**, understood as better management of existing resources, use of unused ones, improved labour productivity, and better farm management and **diversification of agricultural activities**, understood as increased ability to adjust to changing circumstances of income generation and increased resilience to shocks and stresses (new market opportunities, off-farm labour), are seen as the most viable on the path of ensuring food security.

In the table below some livelihood strategies for poverty reduction are highlighted, showing that the main strategies for increasing income and growth are intensification, as shown by the case of Egypt, where between 2004-2006, agricultural production and productivity increased thanks to intensification and a policy of developing desert land (Mediterra, 2009); diversification, increasing off-farm activities and exit from agriculture.

Table 3. Potential and Relative Importance of Household Strategies for Poverty Reduction in the Middle East and North Africa

Farming System	Strategies for poverty reduction						
	Potential for agricultural growth	Potential for poverty reduction	Intensification	Diversification	Increased Farm Size	Increased off-farm Income	Exit from Agriculture
Irrigated	High	High	3	4	0	2	1
Highland Mixed	High	Moderate	1	1	2	2	4
Rainfed Mixed	High	High	3	2	1	2	2
Dryland Mixed	Moderate	Moderate	2	1	1	2	4
Pastoral	Low	Moderate	2	2	0	3	3
Sparse (Arid)	Low	Low	1	2	0	3	4
Coastal Artisanal Fishing	Low	Low	2.5	1.5	0	3	3
Urban Based	Low	Low	2	3	0	4	1
Average for Region			2.0	2.0	0.9	2.3	2.8

Source: Expert judgement. Dixon et al, 2001.
Note: Total score for each farming system equals 10. Assessments refer to poor farmers only. Average for region weighted

Multiple-activities are common at the household level as a way to secure vulnerable livelihoods, such as in highland or desert areas, or to seize better income opportunities. In some Mediterranean countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, Egypt off-farm economy is providing better salary opportunities (Mediterra 2009).

In this context, considering the multiplicity of livelihood activities and strategies and their various determinants, facilitating rural communities' sustainable development demands consideration of the role of the community, the environment and support services and of the household structure, gender, social networks, local institutions, information, policies and markets as drivers. (Dixon *et al.*, 2001).

Rural development is multi-dimensional and cross sectoral because it involves different spheres of activity and assets (provision of services, diversified opportunities for income generation and local economic development, infrastructures, social cohesion) within rural communities. Governments still play a crucial role in rural development, especially considering the need to increase the supply of public goods, such as extension services, storage facilities, rural infrastructure (roads, electricity, information and communication technologies), access to markets (regional and local), credit, education agricultural research and development (De Schutter, 2010) and legal and regulatory frameworks (i.e. land rights). However, they fail in delivering the quality of services rural people need because of lack of coordination of several public agencies involved in the administration of resources or conflicting priorities. Decentralisation processes can help government agencies to maintain closer contacts with local communities for a better management of natural resources, such as securing access to land and water who are becoming scarce and depleted, and services supply. But development can be sustainable only if those who have a stake in it take part to the process.

Thus sustainability implies effective participation of local stakeholders to respond to articulated priorities at the local level. Local institutions, which can also include localities, or collections of villages organized by an institutional framework, and groups, or smaller organizations based around a specific sector in a community with a common bond, such as members of a neighbourhood, religious faith or trade profession (Woodgate, 2012), need to have a role in participatory decision-making coordination and mobilization of available resources (ISRDS, 2000). They are particularly important for providing a framework for collective action, consensus building, undertaking coordinated management activities and collecting, analysing and evaluating information.

As a consequence of the reduced role of the state in the arena of rural development, governments in SEM Countries have attributed a growing role to decentralised institutions and an increasing number of different organisations, formal and informal. However, their responsibilities are still unclear and they remain focused in those areas where conditions are more favourable for growth. This inefficiencies in servicing more marginal communities is the consequence of several factors, such as poor infrastructures, communication, lack of coordination among different levels of authority.

Political measures to liberalise the public sector have brought about the emergence and formation of different forms of community groups, associations and professional organizations, especially in Turkey, Morocco, Algeria. Professional associations followed the dismantlement of agricultural cooperatives.

Box 2

Types of local organisations

One important type of organisation is *farmer-to-farmer extension groups*. These organisations can help spread productivity enhancing and resource-conserving methods between local farmers. Another type is local *credit unions* or *rotating loan groups*, community banks that can provide farmers with small loans to undertake investments in sustainable agriculture. *Farmer research groups* are another type of institution which can help to facilitate community development by allowing rural people to set the research agenda and allowing scientists to work within the complex dynamics of real farming systems. *Local consumer organisations* allow local people to form a powerful market for local agricultural products, allowing farmers to retain more income and consumers to buy their food more cheaply, by excluding intermediaries. Finally, *local resource-management organisations* can form an effective basis for community-led action in such areas as reforestation, irrigation management or soil and water conservation schemes.

(adapted from Woodgate, 2012)

There has been a growing demand for alternative institutional forms replacing traditional and customary organizations. Morocco in 2006 registered 250 producers' associations and groups, 37 chambers and 6000 cooperatives. Algeria had 1300 professional associations and over 800 service cooperatives. Egypt had 5717 cooperatives in 2002 (Mediterra, 2008). In these countries producers associations are supported by the presence of NGOs, helping especially in the negotiations with the State, and a new elite formed by young graduates going back to their place of origin contributing to human capital development.

Strengthening local institutional capacity, however, requires a careful approach guided by consideration of local resource and management constraints. In this decentralization process some problems are encountered. Specifically, limiting rules placing the organizations under the control of local administrations; legitimacy of rural associations, needing recognition from the population to act on behalf of the collectivity and to develop an elected leadership structure with the backing of representatives from a variety of local groups; financial pressures; lack of training and information of grass-roots actors.

VI – Problems analysis

Rural communities remain fragile entities as they have limited access to drinking water, health services, and endure greater levels of poverty (Mediterra, 2008).

They all suffer from the same problems of water scarcity, soil degradation, deforestation, over-grazing, desertification, and lack of adequate policies for local resource management, limited asset-base, limited or unequal market access

1. Demographic pressure

Migration towards urban centres is massive, as young people looking for jobs try to escape the hardship of rural lives. Towns are exploding but they are inadequate to accept this influx of labour force. The consequence is uncontrolled expansion of urban centres overtaking agricultural land, environmental pollution, construction of marginal districts with higher crime rates, unemployment, insufficient infrastructures and a subsequent fuelling of tensions and environmental degradation (Mediterra, 2008). If this on one side causes a further impoverishment of the rural communities

(exodus brings lower services provision, lack of infrastructures, economic decline) on the other side urban unemployment is leading to the return of young people to the communities of origin, Phenomena of “rurbanization” with the formation of new or increased size of small urban agglomerates in rural areas, are visible in countries like Algeria and Morocco (Mediterra, 2009).

2. Low incomes from agriculture

Agriculture doesn't offer a way out of poverty to rural smallholders, especially where they have limited access to land and markets. This is in part due to the downsizing of the farm areas, due to the increasing of people that require fragmentation of properties. In fact, according to the World Bank data, in the SEM Region the value of the arable land (hectares per person) has decreased from 0,45 ha in 1961 to 0,14 ha in 2009. Thus, small-scale producers prefer to move to other non-farm activities, salaried and self-employment, that can offer better opportunities but also function to manage risk and diversify income sources; in fact, the rural households with the least diversified livelihoods are the most poor (IFAD, 2011). However, this has strong implications for food production, as less farmers mean reduced farming activities and also for increasing unemployment rates in the urban centres, where most of the rural labor force migrates.

3. Climate change and degradation of natural resources

Climate change impacts will be extreme, causing pressure on already scarce natural resources. Temperature could rise by 3.5 degrees by the end of the 21st century (International Energy Agency). Precipitations will become more intense at certain times of the year while dry periods will be prolonged (IPPC, 2007) with a total annual precipitation decreasing over much of the Mediterranean region. Water shortages, in an already water depleted area, which uses 70% of its water for irrigation, severe draughts, desertification, increased fire risks and tourism pattern changes will have strong impacts on the rural societies. Rural livelihoods are strictly connected to water availability and use, especially the poorest smallholders, whose survival is based on rainfed production systems susceptible to draughts, floods, shifts in markets and prices. Desertification, usually associated to poor land use, will affect areas usually not at risk due to hotter and drier conditions and will be also determined by higher levels of erosion, salinisation, fire hazards and reduced soil quality. This will cause less available water, less biomass, less soil organic matter content. (IPPC, 2007).

Local temperature and precipitations conditions have a direct impact on food production and access and any short-term variability is a significant risk factor for rural communities (FAO, 2008).

Deforestation is also depriving rural communities of important assets for their livelihoods.

4. Weakness of services in rural areas

Poor services in rural areas are limiting opportunities for rural communities. Lack of education, especially secondary and vocational, training and information are limiting factors for smallholders' development (Dixon *et al.*, 2001). Most of the agricultural workers are illiterate (80% in Egypt), and they constitute an amount of poorly qualified and unproductive human resources, contributing to hamper development (Mediterra, 2009). The enhancement of information and human capital are increasingly needed due to the emerging needs to conserve limited resources and fragile agro-ecosystems, to create skills in non-farm sectors, to adjust to market requirements shaped by demand, thus implying modified practices and patterns of production. Important deficiencies are lack of transport and infrastructures, lack of or limited access to finance, impairing competitiveness of small-scale farmers. In rural areas the formal banking sector is often absent for several reasons, among which perception of higher risks and transaction costs leading to the impossibility for smallholders to buy modern inputs and necessary equipment.

5. Decentralization processes

In the Southern Mediterranean region, civil society does emerge as a development actor although “in the South and East Mediterranean Countries, the legacy of centralisation and authoritarian political systems will continue to influence the forms of intervention and organisation of local actors” (Mediterra, 2009). Local institutions promote economic, social and natural resource sustainable management. Local communities know what they need, share interests and innovations that foster participation in decision-making leading to resource mobilization. Policy makers are shifting their attention to reshape institutions making them more efficient in the delivery of services through the involvement of civil society and private sector. However, decentralisation still suffers of imperfect institutional arrangements and financial flows that prevent rural communities from attaining their priorities.

To make decentralisation systems be effective what is needed is cooperation between governmental, non-governmental and community based organisation. The last two are crucial in a participatory process to build consensus. Naturally, without the appropriate institutional capacities, the system wouldn't work. Capacity building conducted involving local institutions and organisations is necessary.

6. Gender issues

Women's exclusion from the economic, political, civil and social life of rural communities is still marked, despite the fact that many rural households are female-headed for several reasons (wars, HIV mortality rates, migration of men). It has been estimated that if women received the same amount of education as men, farm yields would rise by between 7-22% (J. Berdeguè, 2005; J.Dixon et al, 2001; Roseboom, 2007b). They have no access to financial services and cannot improve their farming activities. Women suffer from a limited access to land control over land, some data show that women landholders are about 5% of total landholders in Egypt and Syria. Gender influences also the size of the land accessible (IFAD, 2007).

Women's activities are confined to family life; they don't benefit as much as men of training, information, credit and extension services, a high percentage are illiterate (in Morocco 62% of women against 39% of men). This is due to gaps and inadequate legal framework and local customs (Mediterra, 2008). Women, in some areas are expected to interact with female extension agents, and they are rare in some regions. However, the trend is reversing thanks to the emergence of women graduated returning to their villages as shown in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia (IFAD, 2007). Illiteracy and cultural bias is also the cause for limited or no access to credit of women; in Egypt for example, in the 90s only 12% of women received a short-term production loan (IFAD, 2007).

Women participation and empowerment is still an issue, as it is demonstrated by their underrepresentation in the boards of associations and cooperatives. Nonetheless, there is an encouraging trend in the region showing an increasing number of women groups and associations at different levels (national and local) who contribute to spread awareness and information on several aspects of interest to them (rights, technology, environment, education, etc.) (IFAD, 2007).

VII –Research needs

1. Creating Knowledge on sustainable agriculture (SA) and Natural Resource Management (NRM) experiences

Sustainable agriculture and NRM are some of the priorities in the SMECs to ensure the conservation and protection of fragile environments and societies who often suffer for externalities. Research has already contributed a lot in designing technical measures for land management, soil and

water conservation, soil fertility management, pest and disease management, etc. Frequently programs have been set up on Integrated Pest Management, watershed management, etc. It is important to investigate on how this technologies have been adopted and have benefited small producers to understand bottlenecks and catalyst factors.

2. Researching on smallholder farming systems and technologies

Research has to orient investigations considering smallholder farming systems specificities and needs or opportunities, keeping an agro-ecological approach. That includes the improvement of key technologies and practices, and their combinations representing the core of small producers engagement; the improvement of management practices to increase farm systems productivity and resilience; the use of ecological processes, minimizing the use of external inputs and non renewable energy. The study of small/medium scale post-harvest agro-processing technologies, with low functioning costs, bio-pesticides.

3. Investigating on local knowledge and institutions

Different studies and experiences show the importance of the role that local communities have in innovation processes, designing sustainable practices and setting up local groups that facilitate sustainable management of natural resources or farm systems. Traditional institutions, such as the Agdal in Morocco, and traditional knowledge, risk to be neglected while they represent important solutions and assets for the development of local and marginal areas.

4. Research on value chains and non-farm sector development with added value for RCs

Research should be oriented to sectors where market opportunities do exists for rural communities, not only in farming, but also along other levels in the value chain, looking for linkages among RCs actors and external players. Sectors like fruit crops and vegetables offer good opportunities in irrigated areas, where smallholder productivity is higher and a lot of labour is required. In more marginal areas spice crops or tourism offer real opportunities (examples saffron, argan). The role and potentialities of smallholders should be analyzed for each level of the value chain: as suppliers of inputs, or processors of products, or providers of other services, such as certification and marketing of products, trainers (market development services). Investigation on how more equitable linkages can be established between small producers and more powerful actors of the value chain (embedded services, contracts, etc.) needs attention.

5. Studies for supporting services decentralization processes and RCs empowerment

Research has to contribute to analyze and find solution to a set of structural and organizational limits, such as marginalization, poor infrastructures, services weakness, imperfect and unstable markets, which restrain the income generating possibilities of the small rural communities. RCs still require education, training, information, financial services etc. for innovating their activities and investing. Nowadays the trend is the decentralization and liberalization of these services, with a strong involvement of local communities in a way to reduce costs and tailor services. Examples are:

studying local governance systems for services innovation and development (research, technical assistance, credit, natural resources management, etc.) based on the decentralisation of responsibilities and active participation of local actors; studying small rural producers land tenure systems, and looking for opportunities to extend their rights over the management of important resources; studying positive externalities linked to the maintenance of rural communities as custodians of the environment and lands.

VIII – Policy needs

An important issue is the existence of a conducive environment for RCs organizations development and policies are the foundation for enabling stakeholders to take actions leading to development and make investment choices.

Policies so far have showed gaps in addressing context specific problems, smallholders specific needs, in ensuring inclusiveness and equity in the access to properties, resources, credits. This is the case for land and water, where the inherent rights can be unclear and different across the country and communities; access to information preventing smallholders from taking advantage of the market like other stronger players (commercial farmers, multi-nationals, etc.). Some policies have often supported, when addressing agricultural productivity and marketing, large-scale producers living in favourable areas. Moreover, policies providing public goods and services, such as healthcare, education, infrastructures, are more favourable to urban people, leaving smallholders behind. This hampers sustainable development. There is still the need for better designed policies in guaranteeing smallholders a better role in debate and decision-making, like allowing them a better representation in political bodies at different levels.

There is a need for policies ready to address impending challenges like climate change, scarce natural resources, agrobiodiversity loss.

Policies need to target vulnerable groups and support small producers' organizations, such as associations, cooperatives, other formal and informal groups, which are an essential tools for RCs development, especially in building effective "smallholder-oriented value chains" (IFPRI, 2011).

Considering the trends and needs mentioned above there has been the emergence in the SEM Countries of rural development policies targeting improvement of living conditions focusing on infrastructures; linkages between farming and non-farming activities; diversification of activities to support rural employment; protection of natural resources; strengthening the role of rural organizations that create responsibilities, reduce transaction costs, facilitate the circulation of knowledge and information. (Bessaoud *et al*, 2009).

Those policies, and a better coordination among these, are crucial for smallholders capacity and opportunities development and also to support and encourage their attitude to innovate.

IX – Final remarks

This work has highlighted the peculiarities of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries, highly heterogeneous, a character that is precious from the cultural and natural point of view but at the source of many vulnerabilities from the point of view of designing integrated regional rural development policies. And this has led to marked social and economic disparities.

About 48% of the population of the area lives in rural areas, where poverty is still concentrated despite a growing urbanization (especially along the coasts).

Agriculture is still the main activity but is not contributing alone to sustainable livelihoods, raise of incomes and food security. As some data provided by IFAD in 2007 show, considering the percentage of economically active people engaged in agriculture in the region, 37.8%, and the contribution of agriculture to regional GDP, 12.6%, it can be seen that labour productivity is still low. One of the reasons is the cut down of public investment in rural areas that would require a stronger engagement of the private sector in investing in rural enterprises, but this is hampered by several obstacles, among which the most important are poor rural infrastructures, poor access to credit, limited rural services like extension, education, training enhancing smallholders' capacities, imperfect market mechanisms. Engagement in non-farm activities would offer smallholders more opportunities and reduce households' vulnerability to shocks and crises.

The SEMC are faced with major challenges, among which scarcity and depletion of natural resources are critical. Access to and use of water and land are at risk, as a consequence of demographic pressure, marginalisation, gaps in the policy frameworks, and will be aggravated by climate change. Small rural communities need to take action in the management of natural resources to guarantee a sustainable use. And in this they need to be assisted by better targeted policies defining clear and equitable set of rules.

Smallholders need a better access to technology and markets, their role and potentialities should be analyzed for each level of the value chain.

Policies are important to create a conducive environment to sustainable development of small rural communities but this needs to be accompanied by good governance, implying better administrative coordination, decentralization of decision-making, improved transparency and accountability, guaranteeing equitable access to natural and financial resources, information, education. Innovative and alternative institutional arrangements should be promoted and supported, specifically, local groups, formal and informal, whose role in promoting collective action, mobilizing resources, clearer need-targeting approach, knowledge of the local context have been repeatedly acknowledged by the latest development trends and approaches.

The elements highlighted just reinforce the concept that “*stability and prosperity will largely depend on implementing models of development which integrate environmental, social and economic dimensions*” (Plan Bleu, 2008) and small rural communities are central in those development models.

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