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Feeding the Mediterranean

Framework note¹

The ability of the world population to find in current food systems (agricultural inputs, farming, , processing, distribution, industries, etc.) the means to meet their food needs, both in sufficient quantity and quality, is a recurring question, giving rise to numerous controversies and proposals on how this could be achieved :

- The action of public authorities and new agricultural policies must be designed and structured to reach this major objective.
- The increase and evolution of global food consumption will require new production models.
- The diversity of the agro-pedoclimatic conditions of the countries and their potential complementarities encourage the development of new international trade models.
- Climate change compels us to rethink the many recommended solutions.

In this challenging context, it is necessary to design sustainable food systems, explore ways to achieve this objective and implement the means of transitioning towards these more sustainable systems.

The concepts of food security and food safety have long been central to this global debate. More recently, the notion of food sovereignty has also emerged, especially in the wake of the COVID pandemic, which has revealed the dependencies previously hidden by the quantitative performance of European food systems. This crisis, the growing socio-economic inequalities between and within countries, as well as the resurgence of armed conflicts (first and foremost

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the war between Ukraine and Russia), have reminded us that food security does not only depend on the agricultural performance, but also on logistics networks, the availability of inputs, geopolitical issues and... the price of energy.

A report by the OECD and the FAO once again underlines that efforts to reduce disparities in primary production must take account of the factors of food loss and waste, as well as those of the preservation of natural resources (land, water, biodiversity), thereby also contributing to putting primary production issues into perspective. This is all the more relevant since previous food policies have focused on food availability – adopting a quantitative approach aimed at increasing agricultural production – while paying little attention to other components of food and nutrition security, namely food accessibility and utilisation. Feeding a growing global population requires new strategies to ensure food and nutrition security with particular attention given to dietary models to support the development of sustainable agri-food systems. In order to be relevant, all of these observations and questions, which concern the entire planet, require a deeper analysis. This should be done by considering regional groups which make sense from multiple perspectives: climatic, historical and geopolitical.

The Mediterranean basin is one such region, both because it has long been recognised as one of the world's climate change “hotspots” and because it has a distinct identity, shaped over the course of history. It has given rise to numerous intergovernmental institutions and policies aimed at addressing the specific issues it faces and at seeking ways to overcome its diversity.

This eleventh edition of the *Parménides* must serve as an opportunity to address the aforementioned questions, not only within the specific context of the Mediterranean, but also by structuring the contributions and debates around the major controversies that this subject brings to light.

A first half-day will be devoted to introductory speeches (CIHEAM, GID, political figure) and three or four general framing presentations of the conference, including a summary of the inter-academic controversy organised by the GID in 2024 on the theme “Food and Population”.

Subsequently, the presentations and debates will take place within the framework of three major themes, each addressed in a half-day session:

- **Agricultural Production Models and Food security, in the Light of Climate Change:**

The preservation of natural resources, made all the more urgent by climate change, has long brought into question alternatives to the so-called “productivist” model. Promoted in Europe and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, at the global level through the Green Revolution, this model was designed to guarantee food security and ward off the threat of a recurrence of the famines of the first half of the 20th century and the political unrest that followed. At the same time, a debate emerged over the capacity of these alternatives (initially mainly focused on organic farming, and later expanding to encompass a range of agroecological practices) to effectively meet the quantitative needs of populations: to what extent can more “ecological” production models guarantee a minimum level of production? To ensure that needs are met, is it not necessary to preserve certain practices whose technical and economic performance at the field level has been proven?

Furthermore, a controversy has also emerged regarding the role of the market (particularly the international market) on the capacity of States to secure their food supply: should reliance on the market be only considered as an indispensable complement to local production capacities which must be supported within a framework of sustainability? Or should priority be given to a logic based on comparative advantages relating to production conditions, recognising that certain exports are essential to enabling the import of essential goods?

- **Agricultural Prices, Food Prices and Public Policies:**

The removal of price guarantee mechanisms for agricultural production in the 2000s has, over the past fifteen years, given rise to new controversies over the distribution of added value within value chains. In their effort to maintain “low” food prices, the European authorities have favoured support for production (through direct payments to farms, decoupled from production levels), thus also granting them a certain advantage on international markets. Despite these measures, a growing number of farmers struggle to secure a satisfactory income, while access to “high-quality” food products remains largely restricted to the most affluent consumers. Should we consider complementary or alternative mechanisms to support consumption? Should the fight against food insecurity, like healthcare and access to employment, fall under a socialised insurance-base approach?

More recently, the COVID pandemic and the disruptions to international trade induced by various conflicts have highlighted the fragility of supply chains raising questions about the balance between "local and global" as a criterion for the sustainability of food systems: Should priority be given to supporting local actors in the transition towards territorialised food systems to guarantee national food sovereignty? Or should national transition policies focus on a broader transition towards sustainable food systems, guided by the imperatives of security and sovereignty? How do these national policies fit within regional and global systems and institutions?

- **Mediterranean Diet, Dietary Patterns, and Food Education and Training:**

The “Mediterranean diet”, recognised as part of the world’s intangible heritage by UNESCO in 2010, is frequently cited as a model that could guide agricultural and food policies in the transition towards sustainable food systems. Such systems should guarantee access to food while contributing to both public health and the long-term well-being of the planet. However, today, many countries in the Mediterranean basin have, in reality, have drifted away from this dietary model, as evidenced by the rising indicators of obesity, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. The underlying causes of this shift are well known: the aggressive marketing strategies of agri-food multinationals, particularly in the beverage sector, have resulted in the widespread penetration of domestic markets for products particularly rich in sugars which have competed with and devaluing more traditional foods. This trend has been largely facilitated by changing lifestyles, mainly in urban areas.

Can the rehabilitation of sustainable diets², such as the Mediterranean diet, help legitimise the reintroduction of more diverse and more agroecologically beneficial agricultural production (such as legumes), and under what conditions? What means can be used to support the transition towards these diets, both in households and out-of-home catering and what are the main obstacles to these changes? How can this transition take into consideration the challenges posed by rapid urbanisation, particularly the expansion of coastal megacities in the Mediterranean basin, which exacerbate the problems related to access to a diverse diet in rural areas? Could this necessary transition be facilitated by improved food education for young people and the wider public, as well as a more targeted training for professionals in the agri-food and distribution sectors?

² Sustainable diets are diets with low environmental impact that contribute to food and nutritional security and healthy lives for current and future generations. Sustainable Diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy while optimizing natural and human resources (FAO-Bioiversity, 2010).

Beyond nutritional and environmental issues, the promotion of the Mediterranean diet carries significant cultural dimensions, which can also help revitalise local economies and thus contribute to the necessary socio-economic and cultural inclusion of younger generations. At what level of the food system should action be taken to restore a Mediterranean-style dietary model? Could the food environment be the key level within the agri-food system on which to intervene?

The transition towards sustainable food systems in the Mediterranean region requires the development of a set of comprehensive, coherent, integrated and holistic policies that address different aspects of agriculture, nutrition, health, lifestyle, society, culture, economy, environment and biodiversity. But how can we implement the transition to more sustainable food systems in an effective way? And how should the sustainability of a food system be defined?

This will be the major objective of this conference.