



CIHEAM

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Speech of the Secretary General

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In this city of Istanbul with its rich history, this epitome of the Mediterranean image of “cultural crossroads”, I would like first of all to thank the Turkish authorities for their hospitality and for organising this ministerial meeting.

My thanks go to you, Mr Mehdi Eker, as Minister, and to your staff, who have been working for months on the preparation of this conference.

Let us look at the plain facts

The climate issue has been rapidly gaining importance in the last few years, not only from the political and scientific point of view, but also, indeed in particular, in public opinion.

One need only observe the media coverage of the climate issue to see that the environmental variable is gradually becoming a core issue in our societies.

The experts have been alerting us to the crucial problem of climate change for several decades. Rising average temperatures, changes in rainfall, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, and so on. These disruptions are realities, which we can no longer ignore.

But let us not be mistaken – these changes in climate are not emerging trends; they are age-old realities and phenomena, which must of course be examined over the long term of history.

But it is also a fact that we are finding it difficult to qualify the immediate agenda and place it in the longer-term perspective that is so necessary for analysing strategy.

What we are in fact observing is that these climate changes are taking place with increasing rapidity. And it is this amplification that for several years has been fuelling growing fears as to the future of our planet. A planet where everything is interconnected, where interdependencies are growing, and where it would be unwise to deny man’s responsibility in the accelerating global climate disruptions.

The Mediterranean region is no exception to this universal concern. Indeed, it is a region where these concerns are magnified.

Let me emphasise two important points to illustrate this.

1. The Mediterranean area – as well as its agricultural systems – has always had to contend with climate problems. Climate constraints are part of its geographical identity and they have been part of everyday life throughout its history.

They have always required ingenuity on the part of Mediterranean farmers in their efforts to adapt and to master a hostile and fragile environment, where water has never been an abundant resource, land has always been scarce and difficult to work, there have always been frequent meteorological incidents, and drought has always been present.

The ability to adapt to climate constraints is not a new challenge for Mediterranean agriculture. The scarcity of water and forest resources has always been a feature of farming systems in the region, where ingenious production methods have been developed in order to adapt and to cope with the circumstances.

2. These constraints are now accelerating, since climate disruptions are intensifying.

And if conditions that are already unstable deteriorate further, the potential threats will be all the greater. For this growing complexity of climate conditions in the Mediterranean region can have alarming effects in ecological, socio-economic and geopolitical terms precisely because everything is connected.

The major challenges for Mediterranean farming systems faced with accelerating climate change

There are four main themes that should be underlined; they are interlinked, and they condition the food security situation in the Mediterranean region to a very large extent.

1. *The depletion of water resources*

The example of water alone illustrates the tremendous tension to which the allocation of a scarce natural resource can give rise. Population growth, industrial development, urbanisation, and competition from new economic sectors have combined to intensify the water issue in the Mediterranean.

To such an extent that, outside circles which attach great importance to the multi-functional role of agriculture, it is often forgotten that in the Mediterranean region water serves primarily to produce food and thus to feed the population.

It is one of man's vital needs and a strategic tool for ensuring stability in countries. The mobilisation of water resources for agricultural purposes can be rethought but its scale cannot be drastically diminished.

2. *Pressure on land resources*

The circumstances of agricultural life are changing as climatic constraints intensify and become more complex. Droughts are recurring more frequently, desertification is progressing, and the area of arable land is shrinking.

These trends obviously constitute additional handicaps for farmers. While several Mediterranean countries have resorted to developing new land and irrigation in order to create farmland, this process is approaching its limits.

For these efforts require considerable input with all the financial and environmental costs that are entailed. Erosion and soil pollution are intensifying, while the problem of salinisation is becoming increasingly acute. Soil deterioration and the artificial development of land furthermore combine as the result of urban pressure.

These phenomena can gradually cause soils to lose productivity and can even lead to the disappearance of plant cover, with the result that biodiversity in the Mediterranean countries is endangered. Wooded areas and forestland are also affected in this panorama of tensions.

In view of these land concerns, there must be better control of the production cycle at source. More responsible soil management is a major challenge that must be met if the sustainability of Mediterranean farming systems is to be ensured.

3. *Tensions in the rural world*

Regional contrasts are a predominant feature of the Mediterranean landscape. Life is still difficult in rural areas and there are still marked development disparities between these areas and the urban coastal zones.

As climate tensions increase, living conditions in the rural world will inevitably become harder for population groups that are already vulnerable. Harder in terms of farming, which is still the major activity in rural areas and is becoming increasingly subject to these ecological constraints, which are becoming a feature of our times.

The collateral effects of these trends are many and varied. They can take the form of worsening poverty and mounting migration, one of whose main causes is the environmental deadlock.

4. **Optimising the food chain**

Better control of water and land, the natural resources that are essential to agriculture, is not enough, however. The food system must be organised more efficiently and its strategic components must be modernised. When climatic conditions change and get harder, agricultural production and distribution tools must evolve.

To put it briefly, if the food production system is to adapt, significant progress must be made in logistics and in the transport of agricultural commodities. Product conditioning and storage, the cold storage chain, and distribution methods are parameters that should form the core of strategies for adapting to climate change.

It must furthermore be underlined with regard to dietary practices that the new ecological order calls for more responsible attitudes in eating habits and consumption.

The CIHEAM's multiple fields of action

Climate change has always been a framework for the CIHEAM's mission of cooperation, in which efforts have focused for some time on issues such as the responsible management of natural resources and measures to improve agricultural production conditions in an unfavourable geographical context.

With this in view, the CIHEAM implements tools for education and special training, joint research networking and political co-operation at the regional level.

As regards training, one-third of our 21 master's degrees are dedicated to subjects that are directly connected with the climate issue. This investment in the human capital of the Mediterranean countries is coupled with the intention of constant anticipation as to trends in production conditions in the region.

And as far as research and development is concerned, we centre our activities on pooling skills in order to gradually build up networks for scientific cooperation amongst the countries of the Mediterranean. The MEDROPLAN programme, which focuses on tools for combating drought, is a perfect example of this work. The conclusions of the NEMEDCA conference, which will be presented to you this afternoon, are partially based on this example of a scientific programme combining cross-cutting analysis and inter-institutional partnership.

And when it comes to political debate, the CIHEAM participates in the facilitation of debate through its publications, its communication activities, and its numerous networks including the present structure – for the ministers of agriculture of our 13 member countries form the pre-eminent high-level network of our organisation.

Avenues for reflection

In conclusion, I think it is important to emphasise several fundamental points for conducting action in the Mediterranean to contend with climate change.

1. The pooling of skills, joint efforts and thus the sharing of instruments, whether they be technical, scientific or educational, must be the guiding principles governing the Mediterranean countries' efforts to adapt to the growing climate challenges.

This is no time for unilateral action or individualism in the search for knowledge, for the subject of climate change is too vast and too complex for any country to seriously imagine that it can apprehend it on its own without sharing with other countries the methods and tools with which this urgent adaptation can be achieved. The present challenges and those that are emerging in the climate field are so tremendous that it would be illusory to imagine that the Mediterranean States can contend with them and find effective solutions on their own.

Regional cooperation in the Mediterranean is a sine qua non for food security. Reducing the impact of climate change, sustainably preserving water and land resources, controlling zoonosis risks – all of these hopes can only become reality if solidarity, sharing and partnership are an integral part of a regional cooperation framework.

I would stress here that, given the fact that the effects of climate change are multifaceted and multisectoral, cross-cutting analysis is imperative if means are to be found for adapting to these trends and the complexity of the phenomena involved is to be grasped in its entirety.

2. Likewise, this is no time for focusing simply on the quantitative dimension of agricultural production, for in the present context of strong environmental pressures, where constraints are intensifying, efforts to seek quality are also imperative in the political solutions that are found to climate disruptions.

We must concern ourselves with the depletion of the quantities of water available and with the responsible management of water resources, but we must also devote thought to improving water quality, which is just as crucial in the adaptation measures to be implemented.

Although the diminishment of agricultural areas must be a matter of concern, there is no doubt that the ability to produce more efficiently on shrinking land is a sine qua non for the future of arable land in the Mediterranean; attention must thus be devoted to the quality of yields, the quality of storage facilities, and the quality of the food chain.

It is a well-known fact that too much is still lost on the circuitous route of the agricultural itinerary from farm to fork and that Mediterranean food safety and the climate variable are indissociable issues.

3. I would like to draw your attention in conclusion to the importance of the role of food policy as a measure for adapting to climate change.

With the increase in saturated fat and sugar intake in the diet, obesity problems are spreading throughout the region and the Mediterranean diet is becoming less prevalent.

If people are encouraged to consume local, Mediterranean, products, and if they are educated to understand the environmental dimension of the food they eat, this can make all the difference. For if several million people make the same small gesture it becomes a most significant act.

So let us bear in mind that the first way to adapt to climate change is perhaps to change one's eating habits and to return to the fundamentals of the Mediterranean diet.