6th edition of the Mediterranean Innovation Agrifood Week (MIAW)

23-27 November 2026, CIHEAM Bari, Italy

Conclusive Remarks of the Secretary General of the CIHEAM, Teodoro Miano

The panel discussion "Networking to Maximize the Impact of Youth Entrepreneurship and Innovation Initiatives," moderated with competence and Enthusiasm by Massimo Zaurrini, marks a pivotal moment in synthesizing regional efforts across the Euro-Mediterranean and African regions.

The primary takeaway from the panel and the accompanying presentation of the Mediterranean Innovation Partnership (MIP) Annual Report 2026 is that the Mediterranean and African regions stand at a decisive demographic and economic crossroads. Regional development policies can no longer treat entrepreneurship as a narrow matter of individual talent, ambition, or personal resilience. Shifting macroeconomic volatility, regulatory instability, and market barriers onto young, vulnerable individuals creates precariousness rather than empowerment. Innovation is fundamentally a non-linear, multi-stakeholder, co-designed process that requires building robust, interconnected, and territorialized ecosystems capable of de-risking the entrepreneurial journey.

Why the MIP Report 2026 implies significant and relevant Outputs: The MIP Report 2026 provides a strategic policy roadmap connecting demographic pressures with sustainable economic prosperity under the overarching frameworks of the AU-EU Innovation Agenda and the Pact for the Mediterranean. Its most significant outputs include:

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1. **Addressing Demographic Realities by Systemic De-Risking The Demographic Urgency**: Africa is the youngest continent (over 60% under age 25), while young people (aged 15–29) constitute one-third of the population in the Southern Mediterranean. Meanwhile, youth unemployment remains critically high, exceeding 30% in North Africa and 25% in several Southern European countries.

2. **Networked Risk Sharing**: High early-stage entrepreneurial activity often reflects necessity rather than structured opportunity. The Report demonstrates that the MIP methodology shifts focus from the "individual entrepreneur" to the quality of the surrounding networks - finance, skills, infrastructure, and institutions - to reduce structural risks and enable sustainable venture survival.

3. **Repositioning Business Support Organizations (BSOs)**: To eliminate the “Missing Middle” and help startups bridge the “Valley of Death” between validation and commercial scaling, BSOs must evolve from early-stage, donor-dependent capability builders into market-facing intermediaries. The Report identifies four operational evolution models :

   Donor-Dependent Capacity Builder: Focuses on early-stage incubation and training but lacks mature market integration.

   Sector-Specialized Transformation Broker: Combines technological depth with sector-specific business process innovation (particularly in agrifood).

   Platform-Based Aggregator: Consolidates fragmented demand and provides collective bargaining power for small ventures.

   Hybrid Public-Market Intermediary: Balances public-good functions (youth and territorial outreach) with revenue-generating specialized services (innovation brokerage, advisory, tech transfer).

The Report advocates for a Mixed-Funding Model where public and donor funds subsidize territorial inclusion, while specialized market advisory services ensure long-term institutional financial sustainability.

4. **Proven Field Methodologies & Open Innovation**

   STARTUP10 Methodology: Implemented across 10 countries, the project demonstrated a demand-driven recruitment funnel receiving 735 applications, screening 140 startups, and selecting 22 for Open Innovation matching with SMEs. The Startup 10 Report serves as a strategic intelligence tool mapping ventures into green and blue economy themes to facilitate data-driven corporate collaborations.

   NET4GREEN Initiative: Strengthened and standardized BSO service quality standards across the Italy-Albania-Montenegro cooperation area to ensure startups engage in high-impact growth pathways.

5. **Activating Universities as Ecosystem Builders & Reforming Incentives**

   Southern Mediterranean universities are uniquely positioned to serve as "curators of the landing" and neutral ecosystem builders through their "Third Mission". The Report establishes four pillars for university orchestration: Legitimacy, Knowledge Flow, Intermediary Structures (e.g., Technology Transfer Offices), and Problem-Oriented Collaboration.

   Crucially, the Report highlights the "Promotion Paradox": academic systems currently reward theoretical publications over industry engagement. It calls for urgent internal institutional reforms to incentivize researchers for patents, industry engagement, and commercialization.



6. **Synergies with Euro-Mediterranean Institutional Frameworks**

The Report integrates regional initiatives into a coherent strategic landscape:

UfM4Jobs Initiative: Enhances demand-supply matching to integrate youth into formal value chains.

Research to Business (R2B) Programme: Led by partners such as Berytech, ANIMA, and the University of Barcelona to accelerate deep-tech research commercialization.

GreenerMed2030 & Blue Economy Agendas: Driving circular business models, green public procurement, and sustainable maritime clusters.

Gender-Responsive Innovation: Focuses policy on technical hurdles faced by women in agrifood, particularly providing access to labor- and time-saving technologies (e.g., crop drying, storage, transport) to reduce food losses and enhance economic inclusion.

7. **Core Territorial Principles**

Rooted in insights from the Mediterranean Innovation Agrifood (MIA) Week, the Report distills principles emphasizing that innovation must be territorially sensitive, climate-resilient, frugal, digitally inclusive, and guided by human dignity as its ultimate horizon.

Need and Advantages of Establishing an Euro-Mediterranean Observatory of Innovation and Youth and Women Entrepreneurship

Transitioning the Mediterranean Innovation Partnership from a network of pilot projects to a permanent system of regional coordination requires a strategic mandate: the creation of an Euro-Mediterranean Observatory of Innovation and Youth and Women Entrepreneurship.

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The Need for the Observatory

Bridging Ecosystem Fragmentation: Current support landscape across the Euro-Mediterranean space remains fragmented, characterized by overlapping initiatives, uncoordinated donor cycles, and isolated geographic hubs.

Standardizing KPIs and Data-Driven Policymaking: Existing evaluation systems rely heavily on short-term "process indicators" (e.g., number of participants trained, events held). There is an urgent need to establish standardized, performance-based key performance indicators (KPIs)—such as market survival rates, post-revenue growth, digital adoption, and job creation—across disparate national frameworks.

Addressing the Education-Market Mismatch: Disconnects persist between academic curricula, university research outputs, and actual private sector and market demands.

Targeted Support for Women and Youth: Women and young entrepreneurs encounter unique structural barriers—including unequal access to finance, productive assets, time-saving technology, and networks. Without systematic, gender-disaggregated monitoring, policy interventions remain generic and inefficient.

Strategic Advantages of the Observatory

Dynamic Policy Intelligence: Serves as a centralized intelligence hub providing evidence-based, real-time data to regional ministries, development agencies, and international bodies to guide policy design and resource allocation.

De-Risking Entrepreneurship: By mapping ecosystems, identifying gaps, and facilitating open innovation pathways, the Observatory directly lowers systemic barriers and risks for young men and women establishing high-potential ventures.

Institutional Continuity and Sustainability: Captures institutional learning and prevents knowledge loss between short-term project cycles, ensuring BSOs receive continuous capacity-building support to transition toward sustainable hybrid models.

Policy Alignment Across Regions: Ensures structural alignment between regional agendas (AU-EU Innovation Agenda, Pact for the Mediterranean, UfM Ministerial Declarations), creating scale, cross-border synergies, and mutual recognition of innovation standards across European, Mediterranean, and African shores.

Empowerment Grounded in Dignity: Systematically measures the socio-economic impact of innovation on livelihoods, ensuring that regional growth translates into inclusive, dignified economic opportunities for future generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Euro-Mediterranean and African cooperation is no longer a matter of diplomatic preference; it is a structural requirement for regional stability, sustainable economic transformation, and social cohesion. Establishing the Euro-Mediterranean Observatory will secure the institutional infrastructure required to turn shared knowledge into concrete opportunities, ensuring youth and women stand as the primary architects of a resilient Euro-Mediterranean future.