

FORUM ON AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN (29 MAY 2018)

A better understanding of the drivers and impacts of migration for forward-looking policies

Jointly organised by the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agromomic Studies (CIHEAM), the The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Global Governance Programme – European University Institute (EUI), a Forum was held on 29 May 2018 at the FAO Headquarters in Rome¹. The aim of this Forum was to discuss different perspectives and challenges associated with rural migratory dynamics, provide policy recommendations and establish a regional multi-stakeholder platform including decision-makers at different levels. The Forum brought together experts from international organisations, development cooperation agencies, research institutions, policy makers, field practitioners and civil society organisations.

The relationships between development and migration are complex and so are the drivers, impacts and implications of migratory processes, especially in rural areas as agriculture and the rural world provide both push and pull factors for migration.

Background

Throughout history, people have always been on the move, especially in the Mediterranean, that “has always been an area of mobility and migration” (UfM, 2017). As migrations physically connect separated territories which experience different dynamics, the Mediterranean provides a relevant setting to explore the relationships between development and migration, given the dramatic agro-ecological as well as socio-demographic asymmetries that characterise the region. At the crossroads of three continents, the Mediterranean represents probably one of the most remarkable regions with several co-existing migratory patterns; all Mediterranean countries are simultaneously areas of origin, destination and transit of migratory flows coming from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and central Asia.

¹ - The informations and opinions are a summary of the interventions coming from the Forum and cannot be portrayed in any way as the official opinions of the organizing institutions.

In this respect, the agrarian world deserves specific attention as the decreasing viability of small farming and the growing vulnerability of rural livelihoods are a major trigger for migratory flows. Emigrating out of rural areas is not a new phenomenon; across the globe, rural populations move towards areas with higher economic potential, with relevant implications for the local economy, society and agroecology. However, the intensity of migratory flows has dramatically increased in recent decades due to interrelated factors including population growth, socioeconomic inequalities, climate change, conflicts and political instability, inadequate access to income opportunities, access to decent jobs, financial services and social protection in rural areas. Despite the fact that agriculture and rural livelihoods constitute priorities in policy agendas for all countries across the region, growing rates of rural poverty and out-migration in rural areas and the limited extent of local integration of rural migrants indicate that appropriate strategies have yet to be forged.

Development and migration

The relationships between development and migration are complex and controversial; even more so when it comes to the rural world. Development is about enabling people to improve standards of living, which may not always coincide with keeping them in their areas of origin. Across the world, the emigration of household members increasingly represents a relevant component of any rural livelihood strategy.

The main reason that triggers migration from rural areas is the negative bias that agriculture suffers from. The policy framework favouring urban consumers to rural producers including food strategies, subsidy schemes, pricing mechanisms etc. has relevant implications on the viability of agriculture and rural livelihoods. The social and cultural aspects of such process should not be underestimated, as the negative image agriculture has inherited does not provide good incentives for the engagement of younger generations.

To redress such bias it is important to address structural constraints such as access to productive assets and limitations in marketing and overall low returns. Investing in agriculture goes hand in hand with enhancing the diversification of the rural economy, which could also involve emigration, especially where labour force exceeds land resources available and/or accessible.

Changing landscapes

People mobility plays a growing role in restructuring the Mediterranean rural landscape. Indeed, evidence shows that across the region migrants have represented an important component for the resilience and capacities of the Mediterranean agricultural sector and the rural world to cope with the recent economic crises. The implications of this phenomenon are significant in terms of food production, natural resource and skills management, territorial integration, social protection and inclusive development – with impacts on the overall resilience and sustainability of our society. Today, these issues are considered major priorities in national, regional and international political agendas that aim at formulating possible long-term solutions.

For instance, in Europe, where a limited percentage of the population engages in agriculture, the average farmer is 55 years old, and lands suitable to agriculture are being abandoned every year. More than a third of the agricultural labour force in EU Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece is currently represented by immigrants, whose contribution plays a crucial role in tackling the social and economic mismatch of labour markets by filling the gaps left by the local population.

On the contrary, in the agrarian worlds in the eastern and southern Mediterranean shores, emigration represents an increasingly important and an integrated component of livelihood strategies of many rural households that are facing growing constraints in accessing productive assets, especially land, water and credit as well as institutional and market opportunities. However, as a result of the political and civil strife that have characterised inner African and Asian territories, it is important to note that the presence of migrants is increasing in agricultural areas of the MENA region.

A double perspective

The impacts of rural mobility in areas of origin are highly context-dependent, and often double-folded. These might include reducing pressures on local resources, and increasing the exposure of local communities to technical innovations and financial investments through the transfer of know-how and remittances. Evidence attests that these bear mostly positive outcomes associated to poverty reduction and food security, though they could contribute to widening existing social and territorial disparities and inequalities.

Emigration can also be problematic in terms of labour shortage as the draining of the workforce could provide significant challenges to local productivity and generational renewal, and ultimately affect the sustainable future of local agrarian systems. In many cases, rural outmigration also leads to the feminisation of agricultural labour, at times enhancing women economic empowerment while also providing room for increasing or perpetuating gender imbalances.

Impacts in destination rural communities are also significant. In the EU, the agricultural sector and rural communities are characterised by a declining and ageing population, with related problems of workforce availability and generational renewal. The increasing presence of immigrants in rural areas has definitely represented a key resilience factor, enabling many farms, rural villages, and agriculture enterprises to remain alive and productive throughout the recent crisis.

The conditions of agricultural migrant workers often remain a matter of concern, especially for those living in illegal conditions. The vulnerabilities of workers relate to the irregular nature of their job and the related social costs, such as curtailed wages, limited rights and lack of access to primary services and social security provisions. Moreover, these features are often accompanied by segregated and unhealthy housing and living conditions, which represent a main determinant of marginalisation and social exclusion.

While most research has addressed the main push and pull factors triggering rural migrations in the Mediterranean, more research should be carried out to discern the different patterns and to link them to the wider policy framework. Overall, scientific research and policy-making would definitely benefit from strengthened interfaces and synergies, and if accompanied by enhanced coordination amongst stakeholders at the different levels.

The way forward

Migration is a growing global phenomenon driven by a wide range of factors, from individual decisions, to social dynamics and structural forces. As migrations connect and relate territories experiencing different dynamics, the Mediterranean provides a quite unique setting to address migrations, as the region is characterised by important agro-ecological as well as socio-economic asymmetries.

Throughout the region, emigration is an integrated component of livelihood strategies of rural households, and local youth seems decreasingly interested in undertaking agricultural livelihoods in their communities of origin.

Redressing agricultural policies and investing in rural development are crucial to provide sustainable livelihood alternatives to ensure that migration is a matter of choice rather than a necessity. Support to entrepreneurship and skills development related to agriculture, food systems and employment creation in rural areas plays a key role in this regard.

At the same time, it is necessary to enhance the positive contribution and opportunities migration can generate in countries of origin and of destination, by supporting investments in farm and non-farm activities, and facilitating the transfer of knowledge, skills and technologies.

Considering the multiple and intertwined drivers and impacts of migration, there is a need for an integrated approach, which combines different perspectives and effective coordination among researchers, policy makers, development and humanitarian actors. Coherence and consistency of policy and investment frameworks in closer synergy with a strengthened policy-research nexus are essential in supporting agricultural development and rural livelihoods throughout the region.

Specific to the Mediterranean, the increased complexity calls more than ever for policy dialogue and exchanges among countries of origin, transit and destination to further strengthen protection along the journey, and to foster integration and development to seize the opportunities that migration brings to all societies. A better stock of existing initiatives, experiences and practices is needed in order to identify lessons to be learned, to assess and disseminate them.