While the challenges that the Mediterranean agricultural sector is facing are largely the same, agricultural research in the Mediterranean is scattered. Sustainable agriculture and food production in the Mediterranean

Along with its rich, diverse cultures and breathtaking landscapes, the Mediterranean is known for its cuisine. Olives, figs, citrus and grapes represent only a sample of this region’s cornucopia. When it comes to agriculture and food production, countries in the Mediterranean share in common their climate, vegetation and unique biodiversity. By the same token, they also share a threat to the preservation of biodiversity and use of natural resources. As such, ARIMNet (Coordination of Agricultural Research in the Mediterranean) has taken strategic measures in support of the region’s sustainable development.

Agriculture accounts for a significant portion of the Mediterranean’s economic sector, and its social customs and practices. The rural population in some Mediterranean countries is high, and subsequently rural development is an important issue these countries face. A fine balance is needed to respond to rural development, urbanisation and environmental challenges present. Solutions to preserving biodiversity in this region are crucial due to the Mediterranean’s highly sensitive vegetation and fauna, and its sensitivity to the biotic and abiotic stress stemming from water shortage, land degradation, natural hazards, and plant and animal diseases.

Scientific research makes a prominent contribution to finding solutions posed by these challenges. This is especially true in the context of fragile and vulnerable resources, where global problems are met with local agricultural research systems. The challenge all countries in the Mediterranean face is not only the need to enhance their own capacity when it comes to agricultural research, but to cumulate their national capacities via renewed cooperation in order to achieve a critical mass and concrete research findings on the area at large.

ARIMNet

Assuring sustainability of production

Although international organisations and partnerships for agricultural research exist, this is a field that remains insufficiently coordinated and inadequately developed in the Mediterranean, especially in terms of multilateral cooperation support. Thus, as a coordinated action, ARIMNet will add to this target research area by addressing pressing issues that have fallen through the research net, and by averting overlap, forming reciprocities, and maximising strengths. Joint activities, such as integration through a web-based information platform, training, and sharing scarce resources, will constitute a major portion of the project.

Since agricultural research development varies among the countries represented by the ARIMNet consortium, the opportunity exists to improve the quality of this research area as a whole. The research on farming systems at national level will be integrated and multidisciplinary in scope. Instead of concentrating on how to increase productivity, the focus of the research and development efforts will be aimed at assuring sustainability of production, the implications of agriculture intensification on soil and water, and the environment in general.

Coordination and cooperation of complementarities

The method involved to achieve this consists of a four-step process, with stages beginning from understanding the current situation to, ultimately, the implementation and funding of joint activities. It is necessary to first create a detailed description of agricultural research in the Mediterranean through the collecting and processing of information, in order to provide
an integrated perspective of the region and research efforts. In short, this will also function as a survey to offer information on how research activities are conducted so that best practices can be highlighted.

It will also be important to analyse future coordination and cooperation opportunities in order to point out complementarities and gaps, as well as any barriers to cooperation or the selection of activities with respect to joint activities and transnational funding. Developing knowledge and fostering the sharing of foresight visions (both national and regional) in the Mediterranean area could also be a driver for the identification of agricultural research priorities. At this stage, only a general outline of the scientific area of selected topics can be drawn. However, given previous indications, it is quite likely that areas such as natural resources management, climate change, plant and animal diseases, food security and food safety, and urbanisation and rural development will form the basis of a final strategic agenda among the participants.

ARIMNet proposes to convene a stakeholder conference in order to decide on the objectives to be addressed, with participants invited from extension services, the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as consumer organisations, natural resources management institutions, and regulatory agencies. The conference will offer a higher legitimacy to the choices of joint research activities and transnational funding, as well as provide the steering committee with content (informed by a broad spectrum of the sector) for choosing the subset of programmes brought into the coordination process, either through joint activities or transnational funding.

One of ARIMNet’s major goals, and measurable criteria, is to assess and demonstrate the feasibility of joint activities. The notion is to heighten the complementarities of the national programmes in order to design a ‘virtual-like’ programme of the whole project. This will be geared towards beneficial, complimentary activities.

Another measure constitutes delving deeper, moving from virtual to ‘real’, in order to set up a joint definition of a programme and the funding of transnational research. It will focus on activities with strong complementarities and more easily exploitable synergies for entering the phase of transnational funding. In order to prepare for this, the project will pinpoint a field which interests participants and through which a transnational funding experiment can be conducted, providing important information on possible barriers to coordination of this type. Both measures can be run simultaneously.

Through the achievement of more efficient and coherent agricultural research at both the Mediterranean and EU level, ARIMNet will increase the ability of European agricultural research to address the issues this region is facing, and support sustainable development for more plentiful, secure and resilient production in the future.

‘ARIMNet will promote a shared vision of the priorities for agricultural research in the Mediterranean and the convergence of national programmes.’

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