

Mediterranean Diet: territorial identity and food safety

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The challenges of food and human nutrition are closely connected to those of world health. If hunger and malnutrition are increasing dramatically all over the world, statistics from the FAO, WHO and the World Bank also tell us that another parallel process linked to food is increasing inexorably and stealthily, and this is the number of people who are overweight and obese.

Considered to be real epidemics, these problems are showing up mainly amongst the younger generations and especially in the cities.

The latest WHO statistics indicate that by 2015 there may be about 700 million obese people in the world.

This does not even exclude the southern Mediterranean countries and the regions whose dietary traditions constitute the last defence against the dietary shift taking place.

Which is to say, the regions where the Mediterranean Diet has been discovered, identified, tested and shown to be a positive factor in the health of the local populations.

In these areas the Mediterranean Diet has always represented a variety of values, combining and linking cultural, socio-economic, dietary, nutritional and environmental factors, which taken together in all their complexity express a Mediterranean life-style which has had world-wide success.

Paradoxically, just as this diet is becoming more popular in the world and increasingly recognised by the international scientific community, the Mediterranean populations are moving further and further away from this model.

There are many causes:

- The feminization of the economic life (17% in Algeria, 24% in Tunisia, 29% in Morocco, 43% in Turkey, 45% in France and Portugal, 35% in Italy).

- Smaller families and household members leaving home.

- Compulsory education and training by a collective taste.

- Overall decline of traditional products in the South, not due to apathy but to fewer occasions for consumption; renewed interest in the North.

- The emergence of supermarkets and "modern" foods in the shops in the South.

This modern life-style also involves a progressive abandonment of the daily habit and of sociable eating, and an impoverishment of the skills of home cooking which have been passed down for generations; these have always been the main features of the Mediterranean dietary model.

More generally we can state that the Mediterranean Diet is being increasingly eroded due to the *globalization of life-styles* and that loss of awareness and understanding of the problem, together with the younger generations' lack of interest is leading to an inevitable erosion of the Mediterranean dietary cultural heritage.

This is also confirmed in the report by the United Nations Environment Programme entitled "The Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development". It announces a deterioration of Mediterranean dietary habits and the decline of the Mediterranean Diet model caused by the predominance of imported models of consumption.

These considerations should give all the interested parties (policy makers, public institutions, universities, research centres, society etc.) some food for thought, because at the very moment that the Union for the Mediterranean is trying to revive the Barcelona Process launched in 1995, the Mediterranean and its peoples risk losing for ever their very cultural identity. But the most worrying aspect of this loss lies in the complete lack of awareness not only of younger generations, but also of governments and society as a whole.

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The diversity of dietary cultures and traditions expressed by the Mediterranean Diet is an important resource which has not yet been used within the framework of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to promote a concrete identity and sustainability of the rural and cultural resources of all the Mediterranean countries.

In effect, the constant presence of the Mediterranean Diet and its values in the world's media has made the very concept of the MD into an extraordinary and very effective marketing tool for the regions, which can promote *agro-food, tourism, crafts and culture* all at the same time.

There are numerous motives for identity and links between the Mediterranean Diet and territory, but in order to be used these must be defined and spread in order to become recognisable.

At the local level, the Mediterranean Diet should be defined and people should be informed about it in order to re-establish awareness of their rich cultural heritage, and at the same time in order to improve the quality standards of products and services to meet new consumer demands. At the national and international levels the aim is to safeguard and promote the health aspects and also territorial specificity. This could bring about the development of "integrated local economies" based on food, agriculture, tradition and culture, with interesting prospects for the entire Mediterranean basin, faced with a global market economy whose limits are increasingly evident, especially when it comes to wastage and environmental damage. The local micro-economies can work very well, respecting the eco-systems, human health and cultures, favouring the conviviality and solidarity which are typical of the Mediterranean societies. This model of local economic development is most meaningfully expressed in agriculture, linked to the principles of seasons and territory, which make a decisive contribution to the protecting and spreading respect for agro-biodiversity.

For the entire Mediterranean region this would mean in general:

- added cultural and economic value
- reinforcement of the common origins and prestige of local products and producers
- improved transparency and protection of the market through definition of quality standards and product identification within the WTO framework
- new business possibilities and an important increase in profit margins due to the effect of added value
- increased consumption of Mediterranean Diet products and therefore greater importance of Mediterranean products on the international market
- the Mediterranean Diet as a driving force in the change-over from negative tendencies and unhealthy dietary habits
- increased assistance and participation programmes of the northern and southern Mediterranean regions
- re-evaluation of the landscape and farmlands
- participation in environmental sustainability and production.

With regard to the very question of environmental sustainability, the MD has been analysed and compared with another kind of diet which is very widespread in western society – the North American diet. This mostly involves consumption of meat and an increasing consumption of sweets and foods with high concentrations of sugars and fats; the MD, on the other hand, mainly consists of carbohydrates, fruit and vegetables. In brief, a person who follows the North American diet has a daily ecological footprint of 26.8 m², and releases about 5.4 kg. of CO₂ into the atmosphere; a person who follows the Mediterranean Diet has a daily footprint of 12.3 m² and releases about 2.2 kg of CO₂ into the atmosphere.

This demonstrates yet again the potential of the Mediterranean Diet, which unfortunately risks not being achieved. In order to valorise the MD in concrete terms, it is necessary to encourage work in the countries on the Mediterranean, for cooperation and an exchange of experiences, and common strategies need to be identified for spreading and promoting the Mediterranean Diet, creating awareness and protecting it. This is why four Mediterranean¹ countries (Italy, Spain, Morocco and Greece) have proposed including the Mediterranean Diet in the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO (United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization). One of the tasks of UNESCO is that of identifying world cultural and natural heritage, protecting it and transmitting it to future generations.

¹ This dossier has also been strongly supported by the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) through the joint declaration signed by the Ministers of the 13 member countries of the Centre (Italy, France, Greece, Spain, Malta, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Portugal, Albania, Algeria and Lebanon) during their last meeting held at Zaragoza from 2 to 4 February 2009. The final declaration, regarding the point about the Mediterranean Diet states "...This is an extraordinary cultural heritage which unites and identifies us, and because of its strategic importance for society, the territory, the environment, the landscape, the economy, production and health, the CIHEAM member countries support the proposed candidature, so that UNESCO may recognize the MD as belonging to Intangible Cultural Heritage."