Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Agriculture in Euromed (including the importance of women’s work in the agricultural sector and the role of cooperatives)’

(own-initiative opinion)

(2010/C 347/06)

Rapporteur: Mr NARRO

On 26 February 2009, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on Agriculture in Euromed (including the importance of women’s work in the agricultural sector and the role of cooperatives).

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 3 February 2010.

At its 460th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 February (meeting of 18 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 156 votes in favour with seven abstentions.

1. Conclusions

1.1 Mediterranean agriculture is characterised by its wide variety. In addition to the differences in production systems, there are divergent levels of development, public aid for agriculture and economic structures. Nonetheless, throughout the Mediterranean basin, agriculture acts as the backbone of rural areas and the driver of their economies.

1.2 The unstoppable process of agricultural trade liberalisation underway will have an impact on the sustainability of farming in the Mediterranean. Liberalisation in itself should not be the objective of Euromed but, rather, a means to achieve the key objective of economic, social and regional development on both shores of the Mediterranean.

1.3 The EESC believes that there should be a transitional phase during which the necessary agricultural changes could be introduced in the countries concerned, helping them to securely face the agricultural challenges raised by the globalisation of the economy, trade and knowledge.

1.4 The impact studies conducted by the European Commission on the consequences for agriculture of a Mediterranean free trade area make it clear who the ‘big losers’ of the process will be. Southern Europe’s fruit- and vegetable-growing regions will not be able to stand up to the competition from their Mediterranean neighbours, while continental production in the southern Mediterranean countries (cereals, milk, meat, etc.) will gradually be abandoned. The current liberalisation process must provide for the protection of sensitive products.

1.5 This phase of change for Mediterranean agriculture, characterised by the food crisis and liberalisation, means that public authorities must come up with a robust long-term strategy that will enable farming to continue as a viable activity. This strategy should be based on three aspects: training, technology and research, with a view to easing the transition towards an agricultural sector that puts quality, added value and an improved marketing process first.

1.6 Public policies in the Mediterranean should aim to ensure that the effects of liberalisation are effectively managed. The EESC believes that policies are needed in the short and long term which establish real compensation, through lines of additional support, for EU producers from the sectors most affected by trade liberalisation. At the same time, policies should be put in place to diversify activity in rural areas and support farmers and their businesses, helping them to adapt to the new context of production.

1.7 The Mediterranean countries must implement training policies geared towards the agricultural sector in order to encourage high-quality employment, help the workforce adapt to the requirements of the new production model, and limit the negative effects of the rural exodus on employment and migratory flows.

1.8 In order to support the agricultural development process in the Mediterranean basin, the EESC believes that, as a priority, the role of local agricultural organisations should be strengthened through development projects designed to improve farmers’ representability and involvement in the decision-making process.

1.9 In order to make Mediterranean farming more competitive, a more dynamic marketing strategy is needed. One of the mainstays of the new strategy will be cooperatives and other producer organisations, which must serve as instruments that farmers can use to group supply and improve their market positioning. The EESC supports initiatives that will improve the way that the food chain operates and profits are shared throughout the chain.
1.10 The EESC considers it essential to enhance the role of women and young people in farming and rural society. In the southern Mediterranean countries, women contribute significantly to agriculture but their work goes largely unnoticed and unpaid, and is often conditioned by harsh social factors. New structural policies and incentives are needed that will give value to women’s work, enable them to move out of the informal economy, and foster the creation of community associations as a means of boosting entrepreneurship, which is also needed in the agricultural sphere.

1.11 Water management is key factor in the development of Mediterranean farming. One of the worst effects that climate change will have in the Mediterranean will be the dwindling water resources available for farming. The EESC recognises the need to implement new monitoring and modernisation policies that make it possible not only to save water but also to optimise the use of this precious resource. All these policies must be based on the use of new technologies that ensure the social, economic and environmental viability of irrigation.

1.12 Institutional cooperation should be accompanied by closer cooperation between civil society players. It is therefore essential that the EU facilitate regional cooperation and greater involvement of civil society representatives in order to share experiences and devise concrete projects that help Mediterranean agricultural organisations in order to promote a cross-functional agricultural model. In any event, the agricultural chapter of the Union for the Mediterranean should be strengthened, and progress should be made in setting up the Bank of the Mediterranean.

2. Introduction

2.1 The launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995 gave a boost to the EU’s relations with its Mediterranean neighbours (1) and laid out the guidelines for the establishment of an area of peace and economic prosperity in the region. However, 15 years after the Barcelona Declaration, only moderate progress has been made and a degree of disappointment is felt by the EU’s southern Mediterranean partners.

2.2 The recent political initiative that is the Union for the Mediterranean (2008), set up under the aegis of France and Germany, is proof that after years of paralysis the Mediterranean question is again high on the EU’s agenda, with the resulting revival of the debate on agriculture – a strategic sector in the 21st century.

2.3 The EESC has decided to draw up this own-initiative opinion in order to contribute to the essential debate on the role that the agricultural sector should play in the Mediterranean basin. The development of this sector has reached a key phase, which will be marked by major challenges on a global scale.

2.4 The great complexity of agriculture in the Mediterranean makes it impossible to address day-to-day sector-specific problems in depth. However, the Committee wishes to initiate a strategic discussion of the future of Mediterranean farming, starting with the consequences that an area of free trade in agricultural products could have for the Mediterranean basin. The effects of liberalisation are not only restricted to the field of trade, as they also have a significant impact on the economic, social and environmental development of a country.

2.5 In the past, the southern Mediterranean countries have roundly criticised the EU for its excessive agricultural protectionism, while the EU has raised concerns over the negative impact in many European regions of certain imports, particularly fruit and vegetables from Morocco, which, owing to its agricultural potential and geographic and cultural proximity to Europe, is one of the flagships of Mediterranean farming. The Mediterranean’s other major agricultural nation is EU candidate country Turkey. Farming is the biggest sector in the Turkish economy, and it has immense agricultural potential as one of Europe’s green reserves. In recent years, Egypt has also become one of the Mediterranean countries with the greatest agricultural potential.

2.6 Going beyond a traditional view of agricultural relations in the Mediterranean, it is essential to establish a more detailed, strategic, long-term view of Mediterranean agriculture which would allow for synergies to be found and would facilitate the economic and social viability of the sector on both shores.

2.7 The experience of the EU in its commitment to high-quality production, the value placed on product origin, the modernisation of infrastructures and training, should serve as an example, and as guidance when tackling the approaching changes in the southern Mediterranean. However, important lessons are not only learned from positive experiences. Unfortunately, in Europe, the inconsistency between agricultural aid policies, the lack of long-term planning and the imbalances in a food chain characterised by disparate supply, from which large retailers benefit, serve to illustrate some of the risks that should be taken into account during what can be considered as a major transitional phase for Mediterranean agriculture.

2.8 There is a clear split in farming in the southern countries: on the one hand, a dynamic industry focused on export, with capital injected by major commercial players; on the other, a farming sector focused on local markets in which smallholders operate without sufficient economic organisation.

(1) The Union for the Mediterranean currently comprises the 27 EU Member States plus the following Mediterranean States: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Monaco, Mauritania and (with observer status) Libya.
3. The trade liberalisation process

3.1 In line with the roadmap established in the context of the Barcelona Process (1995) preferential treatment is to be given to agricultural products. The gradual liberalisation of trade in agricultural products through a preferential, reciprocal access scheme takes the traditional trade flows and respective agricultural policies (2) into consideration. The priority since 2005 has been to set up a free trade area in 2010. This date should be considered as a guideline rather than a deadline, as the countries are moving towards this free trade area at different speeds.

3.2 The EU has in recent years signed new, ambitious agricultural agreements with Israel, Jordan and Egypt. The extensive, complex negotiations with Morocco are ongoing, and despite the scarce information provided by the European negotiators, it seems likely, after the recent closure of negotiations, that the agreement will be signed in 2010. Of the other Mediterranean countries, only Tunisia and, recently, Algeria have initiated new negotiation rounds.

Agricultural negotiations between the EU and the Mediterranean countries

3.3 Protection in the EU has involved multiple instruments, often in combination: quotas, customs duties, calendars, import licences, entry prices, etc. Therefore, it can be concluded that the EU has traditionally granted support for its farmers through customs measures, as traditional CAP aid plays a very minor role with regard to Mediterranean production (3). In addition to this increasingly marginal customs protection, aspects such as distance, production costs and infrastructure are key factors in trade in agricultural products.

3.4 The European organisation COPA-COGEC, which groups together the EU’s main farm organisations and cooperatives, stated in its position on the Euro-Mediterranean agreements that the EU needs to respect certain basic principles in negotiations. Of these, it highlighted the need to maintain the concept of sensitive products and an entry price for fruit and vegetables, the reinforcement of customs inspections to prevent fraud, the establishment of an effective plant health monitoring system, and respect for product seasonality, encouraging common management of production and marketing calendars (4).

3.5 Producers from the southern Mediterranean face difficulties when it comes to enforcing European health legislation. The requirements applied to agricultural products imported from the Mediterranean are less stringent than those imposed on Community products in terms of animal welfare, traceability and environmental standards. The EESC urges the EU to provide its Mediterranean partners with the necessary technical assistance for trade, technology transfer and support in establishing traceability and early warning systems.

3.6 The EESC has repeatedly highlighted the importance of traceability and quality certification as a keystone of the Community agricultural model. The system set up in the EU makes it possible to obtain information on a foodstuff ‘from farm to fork’, and to pinpoint and locate the path taken by a food through all the stages of production, processing and distribution. Traceability should be addressed as a priority in agricultural negotiations with the countries of the Mediterranean basin.

3.7 At present, agricultural liberalisation in the Mediterranean, although incomplete, already covers 90 of trade. The EU is the world’s biggest importer of food, and is currently undergoing an unprecedented process of trade opening. Despite this, there remain a number of sensitive products for which specific provisions have been laid down, so as not to penalise certain producers who could be adversely affected by any significant increase in agricultural imports, particularly fruit and vegetables.

3.8 The fruit and vegetable sector plays a key role in this liberalisation process, as it accounts for almost half of the agri-food exports from non-EU Mediterranean countries to the EU. Many areas in southern Europe are specialised in growing fruit and vegetables, and their regional economies depend heavily on these crops. In twenty regions of the EU, over half of final agricultural output is devoted to fruit and vegetable crops. The EU should ensure that in agricultural agreements reached with the southern Mediterranean countries, protection is afforded to those products that are considered ‘sensitive’ and would be most adversely affected by the agreements.

3.9 The impact analyses carried out by the European Commission on trade liberalisation in the Mediterranean (5) clearly show that in a scenario of partial or full liberalisation, the EU would multiply its exports of certain ‘continental’ products (cereal, dairy produce and meat). In contrast, production in these sectors would see a sharp drop in countries such as Morocco, where over a fifteen year period milk production would drop by 53 %, meat by 22 % and wheat by 20 % (6). The risk of monocultures could lead to a lack of supply and dependence on imports.

(1) The regular conferences of Euro-Mediterranean trade ministers are responsible for giving political impetus to the trade aspects of the liberalisation process. The most recent ministerial conference was held in November 2009 at the EESC in Brussels.

(2) The fruit and vegetable sector accounts for 16 % of the EU’s total agricultural output, but the amount granted in aid is no more than 4,5 % of EAGGF expenditure.

(3) EESC opinion on Health security of agricultural and food imports (OJ C 100, 30.4.2009, p. 60).

(4) Sustainability impact assessment, Eu-Med Ag Pol.

(5) This can be found in the study on Defining a trade strategy for Southern Mediterranean Countries, Antoine Bouet, International Food Policy Research Institute, 2006.
3.10 The EESC believes criteria and clauses should be introduced in the corresponding association agreements, making it possible to verify the impact of trade opening for both sides, in particular with a view to checking whether the ultimate aim of the Community external policy has been achieved: to make progress as regards respect for the environment, in labour rights and – above all – in the social and economic development of the local population and thus not only large local or foreign corporations. In this regard, it is essential that the opening of European markets be dependent on meeting certain minimum standards in socio-occupational, environmental and health matters, to the benefit of food security and the security of European consumers, but also to ensure better living and labour conditions in the countries of the southern Mediterranean.

3.11 The EESC considers that appropriate mechanisms must be introduced, and existing mechanisms improved, in order to ensure compliance with the clauses accepted by both sides in matters concerning trade liberalisation under the association agreements, from the viewpoint of compliance with the customs quantities and quotas set.

The role of public authorities with regard to liberalisation

3.12 The southern Mediterranean is currently facing major dilemmas that have also affected the EU: what role should public authorities play in a process to liberalise and deregulate the markets? In this context, the EU and, more specifically, the development of the CAP have led to surprising changes in direction which should serve as an example to the southern Mediterranean countries. By learning from the successes and failures of their European neighbours, they could implement effective, consistent public policies in the medium and long term, which would enable them to face up with greater certainty to globalisation which, in some cases, can cause negative distortions in the agricultural sector. In international negotiations, this sector can never be treated as just another economic sector, according its contribution to a country’s GDP.

3.13 Until recently, agriculture was not a priority among the policies of Mediterranean countries outside the EU, and the cooperation funds from the EU and international bodies were channelled elsewhere (\(^\text{(*)}\)), revealing a short-term outlook that has undermined agricultural development in these countries. In recent years, politicians have begun to change their way of thinking.

3.14 The food crisis of 2008, with the rise in prices of basic raw materials and the fears arising from the liberalisation process, has roused some national and regional authorities to rethink their traditional approach to agriculture, based on multiplying production and focussing efforts on agricultural exports.

3.15 The agricultural strategy of the Mediterranean governments must facilitate a sector that focuses on quality, added value and improving the marketing process. The philosophy is clear and, indeed, is shared by all stakeholders in the Mediterranean; however, the harsh reality is that the lack of economic resources is a difficult hurdle to overcome.

3.16 Training, technological support and research are basic components that must be included in any future agricultural policies implemented in the Mediterranean countries. Combining these three factors should help to improve the position and viability of Mediterranean agriculture, in order to ensure food security and combat poverty and the rural exodus.

3.17 Despite their resounding declarations in favour of agricultural research, many Mediterranean countries have not shown the political drive needed to create a favourable legislative framework. Research efforts should be stepped up in order to improve growing techniques and provide new market niches, making a leap forward in quality. Demographic growth means that, today, one hectare must feed three times more people than forty years ago. Technological progress must be available in order to increase productivity, while biotechnology can make a real contribution to a more productive, environmentally friendly form of agriculture (\(^\text{(*)}\)). For the future, research must make it possible to strengthen cooperation between public and private initiative and improve coordination between bodies, so that the basic, real needs of agriculture and farmers can be met.

An instrument to tackle the agricultural challenge: Morocco’s Green Plan

3.18 One example of this new way of thinking can be seen in the Green Plan put forward by Morocco in April 2008, which shows an interesting new agricultural strategy in the Maghreb. The plan aims to turn agriculture into the main driver of the national economy within 10 to 15 years, through strong public investment (\(^\text{(*)}\)), in order to achieve two key goals: a modern, high-added value agricultural sector, and increased earnings for small farmers.

3.19 In order to achieve these ambitious goals, the Moroccan government has drawn up regional plans that are to focus on three types of projects. The first will involve easing the transition from cereal crops to higher added value crops which are less dependent on water. Secondly, there are plans to improve intensive farming, which should provide farmers with new production techniques. Lastly, the regional plans will help to diversify production and add value to regional and local produce.

\(^{(*)}\) Of all the MEDA funds granted to Mediterranean partner countries, only 5 % was earmarked for agriculture and rural development.

\(^{(**)}\) The EU and the global food challenge (OJ C 100, 30.4.2009, p. 44).

\(^{(*)}\) Over the next ten years, Morocco will channel around MAD 150 m through the Agricultural Development Agency in order to implement the measures contained in the Green Plan.
Liberalisation’s losers on both sides of the Mediterranean

3.20 On a regional level, the adverse effects of liberalisation will be felt particularly strongly by those European regions specialised in growing fruit and vegetables. In every case, these regions are among the least advanced or most disadvantaged in Europe. They include, for example, Andalusia (Spain), Thessaly (Greece), Calabria (Italy) and North Douro (Portugal). According to the impact study carried out by the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) (10) on behalf of the European Commission in 2007, the negative consequences of a Euro-Med liberalisation would not be broadly distributed but rather concentrated in a few regions, which will be the true losers of liberalisation.

3.21 Small producers in the southern Mediterranean will directly suffer from the opening of borders, as they are forced to stop producing due to an inability to compete with the continental production of their northern Mediterranean neighbours. In this context of liberalisation, the necessary instruments must be provided to enable small producers – the most vulnerable parties – to benefit from the new agreements. Policies to support earnings, organise and modernise their agriculture must be made priority.

3.22 The public authorities must undertake to reverse the current dangerous trend whereby the main beneficiaries of this process are large farms, multinationals and foreign capital investors. The benefits of market opening should be shared out evenly and fairly across the production chain.

Organising the production sector in the light of the new marketing structures

3.23 In the EU, the imbalance between the different operators within the food chain is severely damaging to the production sector, which cannot compete with the dominant position achieved by large retailers. This potential concentration of major players will also occur as agriculture is developed on the other side of the Mediterranean basin. Farmers could lose their links to the national market and find themselves subject to the requirements imposed by the supermarkets.

3.24 The competitiveness of the agricultural sector does not only rely on better production in terms of price and quality. To give real meaning to the concept of ‘competitiveness’, marketing strategy is particularly important. Given the highly fragmented nature of the production sector, the increase and development of ways to concentrate supply, such as producer groups, cooperatives, etc., must undeniably become pillars of the new strategy.

3.25 Organising producers into cooperative movements is not simple. In the southern Mediterranean, the development of agricultural cooperatives still faces many obstacles, despite emerging legislation designed to lay the necessary groundwork. The biggest problems facing cooperatives in the Mediterranean include the lack of appropriate staff to manage the cooperative as a business, the instability of economic resources, over-dependence on state aid, the rigidity of legislation, and the difficulty in accessing markets. To be a success, the cooperative movement must overcome these problems and demonstrate a new philosophy based on a collective approach. However, throughout the Mediterranean, the first requirement will be for farmers to be able to carry on farming and not be forced out of the sector.

3.26 Through cooperation and organisation, farmers can improve their position and overcome the major handicap that their fragmentation represents. The success of the Moroccan dairy farmers’ cooperative, COPAG, which produces 170m litres per year, accounting for 11 of national output, has become a model to be emulated by other sectors. This cooperative generates added value, distributes subsidies and guarantees a minimum price for its members. However, in countries like Lebanon, many cooperatives are set up solely because such status is required in order to gain access to the development programmes run by NGOs; unfortunately, when the funds dry up, the cooperatives fade and disappear.

3.27 In the southern Mediterranean, the development and promotion of associations require firm support from public administrations. Membership of cooperatives should be incentivised so that it becomes a useful, profitable instrument for farmers. Simply setting up a cooperative is not a guarantee of success; they must be dynamic and show entrepreneurship if they are to compete on a globalised market, consolidating the revenue of their partners and improving their ability to access inputs, services and markets.

4. Social change in Mediterranean farming

4.1 Agricultural free trade should encourage and be fully compatible with social development and the specific features of regions. The Committee believes that the social cost of integration into global trade flows should be analysed in detail, in order to gauge the impact of this unstoppable process and help more vulnerable communities to prepare themselves for it. Although hard macroeconomic data shows that agriculture only represents a modest share of Mediterranean trade (7% of total exports and 9% of total imports), in reality, the political and social impact of these products is much higher.
4.2 Social fragility in rural areas of the Mediterranean translates into poverty, unemployment, lack of infrastructure, land degradation and an ongoing rural exodus. As has occurred in EU countries, adaptation to globalisation will lead in the Mediterranean countries to the loss of people from farming, the depopulation of more disadvantaged rural areas and greater pressure on migratory flows.

4.3 To relieve the negative effects of liberalisation in the rural environment, national and regional authorities must implement robust rural development policies that improve the competitiveness of small farms, create real employment alternatives for farmers forced to abandon the profession, and enable rural areas to successfully and safely diversify this sector which is essential for their socio-economic fabric. The dangerous trend of rural depopulation can only be reversed if women and young people are successfully integrated into the farming sector.

Women and young people: factors for change

4.4 Over the next few years, women and young people will become the real drivers of agricultural change in the southern Mediterranean. The Mediterranean sustainable development strategy calls for the implementation of programmes that help strengthen the role of women in decision-making processes and in educating new agricultural and rural leaders who can, with their capacity for innovation and preparation, be factors for change.

4.5 Women are becoming increasingly involved in the agricultural sector in the Mediterranean. The role they play in agriculture is gradually increasing and their potential is vast, given the significant increase in population, environmental changes and the migration of men from the region towards urban centres or more prosperous areas. Unfortunately, official figures are few and far between, and give scant recognition to the true contribution that women make to farming.

4.6 In the Mediterranean, a number of interesting initiatives have been implemented to improve the situation of women in the rural environment. In Morocco, funds from the MEDA programme financed argan oil cooperatives comprised entirely of women – a model which has been extended to other areas in the Mediterranean. In Lebanon, the National Observatory for Women in Agriculture and Rural Areas (Nowara) was set up in 2008 and has helped to implement a number of initiatives to promote gender equality in farming, identifying programmes and activities to improve women’s access to production resources.

4.7 The treatment of women working in the agricultural sector differs significantly depending on the national context. In Lebanon, only 3.4% of women work in farming, and in Algeria the situation is similar, with very limited participation of women in economic activities. In contrast, in Egypt, 50% of agricultural work is carried out by women, although they are not allowed to manage agricultural assets that they have inherited; in Syria, the situation is even worse as, in practice, social conventions force women to renounce any land ownership rights they may have. Morocco stands out due to the high involvement of women in agricultural work, at around 60%, while the figure in Turkey rises to 70%. In these countries, women mainly carry out labour-intensive, non-mechanised tasks. Women are responsible for harvesting and storing food products, and play a significant role in sowing, irrigation, pest control and fertilising.

4.8 The women who carry out farming activity in the southern Mediterranean countries face a series of major handicaps that influence the development of their work: high illiteracy and lack of education, unpaid work, restricted access to property, zero participation in the decision-making process, worse working conditions than for men, poor access to credit and, of course, religious and social factors that deny women the right to decide. Unfortunately, much remains to be done in order to achieve equal opportunities for men and women in agriculture and the rural environment. The Mediterranean governments should therefore make this task a priority.

5. Mediterranean farming in the face of climate change

5.1 Every scientific study conducted to date agrees that the Mediterranean area will be the most affected by climate change. The geographical and climatic conditions of the farming practised in these areas make Mediterranean agriculture especially vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, particularly given the population growth in the Mediterranean and the need, emphasised by the FAO, to multiply our food production. These effects could include:

— the disappearance of crops and loss of biodiversity

— greater desertification and expansion of arid areas

— emergence of new pests and diseases

— lower yields and high volatility in production

— diminished water resources

(1) Women’s contribution to agricultural production is particularly significant in areas where migration to urban areas is high.
(2) See www.nowaralebanon.org for more information.
5.2 In order to adapt to climate change, urgent measures and valid instruments are required to improve risk management in agriculture: new, more resistant varieties must be developed; technical advice must be provided for farmers in their daily work; and, as a priority, research and new technologies must be made available to the agricultural sector.

The link between water and farming

5.3 Without doubt, the element most affected by climate change and the key factor in the development of Mediterranean farming will be water. The EESC has already given consideration to the impact of reduced water resources on farming (14) and continues to warn of the need to gear public policies towards more sustainable use of this resource. The challenge lies in continuing to generate wealth through agricultural production, added value, employment, etc., while the amount of water available decreases.

5.4 The ‘Plan Bleu’ (15) has already announced that demand for water in the southern and eastern Mediterranean will increase 25% by 2025. This increased demand will have to be managed in a context marked by the scarcity and reduced availability of this precious resource. The EESC believes that this sustainable water management cannot exclusively rely on cutting irrigation, but must also be based on better monitoring and modernisation policies.

5.5 In Mediterranean agriculture, irrigation plays a strategic role. Arable land in Egypt is fully irrigated; Morocco aims to increase its irrigated area by 450 000 hectares by 2025; Israel has the world’s highest technological capacities for managing water for agriculture; Tunisia has managed to successfully implement an irrigation water management programme that has been commended by the FAO and the World Bank.

5.6 The Tunisian government has opted for an improved public-private partnership in order to apply its strategic plan. This strategy has involved the awarding of farming contracts with incentives for farmers, programmes to improve the irrigated area by easing the transition to crops with higher added value and lower water requirements, distributing the quotas granted for the basin, and a pricing system that has enabled costs to be recouped. The region of Andalusia in Spain is an example of modernised irrigation where, in only 30 years, water requirements per hectare have been halved.

5.7 The EESC recognises the need to implement new technologies that make it possible not only to save water but also to optimise its use. When it comes to agricultural water management, different instruments should be explored, such as localised irrigation systems, water purification and desalination, new infrastructures, varieties that are genetically better suited to water stress, the use of unconventional water, etc.

Brussels, 18 February 2010.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI

(14) See the EESC opinions on The link between climate change and agriculture, OJ C 27, 3.2.2009, p. 39; Addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts, OJ C 224, 30.8.2008, p. 67.

(15) The Plan Bleu is a centre for environmental cooperation and development in the Mediterranean which falls within the framework of the UN Programme for the Mediterranean (UNEP/MAP).