

Redressing Policy Making in Pastoral Areas of the Mediterranean Region

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical analysis of the evolution of the policy, institutional and legislative frameworks impinging on the livelihoods of pastoral communities in the different flanks of the Mediterranean, and of the underpinning narratives, with a view to support a better informed and more consistent policy framework. The Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union is paramount in defining evolving and shrinking pastoralists' room for manoeuvre, not only in Europe but also in its neighbouring regions. In Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, despite a quite un-harmonised and diversified ideological and institutional setting, agricultural policies in the different countries seem to converge to a very similar and consistent framework. Throughout the Mediterranean, the growing compliance with policy measures, institutional regulations and legislative rules have exposed agro-pastoral farms to increasing degrees of uncertainty and dependence on public subsidies, loan schemes and market prices, making their navigation decreasingly sustainable.

Keywords: Pastoralism; Rangelands; Mediterranean; Pastoral Policies; Common Agriculture Policy; EU

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1. INTRODUCTION

Extensive livestock systems all over the globe are facing new and increasing uncertainties. Globalisation of trade exchanges, demographic trends and environmental changes, including climate patterns, contribute significantly to reconfigure production and consumption patterns, and transform the agro-ecological as well as the institutional landscapes that underpin the socioeconomics of pastoralists. In the Mediterranean, policy developments and the evolving institutional framework show evident flaws in recognising and supporting the specificities of agro-pastoral resource management and its economic and ecological potentials - albeit with different patterns and dynamics.

At the crossroads between three different continents, the region ranks amongst the most exposed to climate change, characterised by environmental changes and shifting human pressure, spurred by demographic trends and migratory patterns. While in Europe the number of people engaged in the primary sector has decreased steadily in the last five decades, agriculture still proves to be the main source of employment and income for a large number of communities in the northern Africa and western Asia flanks. Across the Mediterranean today, a livelihood based on producing food and managing landscapes through extensive livestock farming is a decreasingly attractive option for the local youth. This raises major policy concerns, including those relating to sustainable food production, management of biodiversity and wider debates over the rural-urban and generational divides, particularly in the mountainous and dryland settings where pastoralism represents a major livelihood source.

2. A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE POLICY FRAME IN THE MENA REGION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has vast areas of steppe and desert favourable to pastoralism due to prevalent arid and mountainous conditions. The climate is typically very hot and dry, characterised by low annual precipitation and high evaporation rates. Pastoral areas in this region are comprised of high-altitude mountains, the Mediterranean coast, and the Sahara Desert. MENA agro-pastoral systems exhibit accordingly a large range of diversity, from cattle herds in semi-arid areas, to sheep and goat flocks in arid ones and camels in nomadic ranges. In these regions livestock economies are strategic for ensuring national food security, and also for alleviating poverty for significant portions of the population. Livestock help reduce vulnerability to external shocks and increase smallholder resilience, including for rural women for whom the processing and marketing of livestock products might provide an important livelihood source (Ates and Louhaichi, 2012; FAO, 2021; IFAD, 2003).

Animal production and rangeland management are, therefore, high priority issues for national and regional politics. Livestock trade and marketing are important economic drivers, as the demand for animal protein consumption has grown steadily since the 1960s, spurred by a fast-growing, wealthier, and increasingly urban population, and is projected to double in the next decade (Ates and Louhaichi, 2012; Mohamed et al., 2019; World Bank et al., 2009). Understanding the political economy underlying livestock management, production and trade is, therefore, critical to understanding the broader policy framework in most MENA countries.

The regional political frame is characterised by significant tensions and disputes amongst most neighbouring countries holding relevant consequences on pastoral mobilities and trade networks, and often even on their integration into the local economy and society. Pastoralists represent important constituencies in the region, such as the Berbers or the Bedouins, but are often minorities in national politics. Some groups are primary actors in longstanding conflicts, such as the Sahrawi and Kurds fighting for political independence, Sinai Bedouins struggling against central State control or the Palestinian Bedouins resisting the military occupation. Pastoral communities display a strong attachment to their territory and an important reliance on customary social networks and governance systems. These domains have proven problematic for central States, as these provide flaws to their legitimacy in and control on peripheral areas, including border regions. Main policies have, therefore, focused on disarticulating and reducing the power of local customary institutional structures, while also seeking to incorporate pastoralists into national economies, with the dual intention of enhancing the availability of animal products for the burgeoning urban population and providing opportunities to sustain rural income and livelihoods. The recent conflicts that have recently ravaged the region have further affected livelihoods in these drylands (Nori, 2022 b,c).

3. ECONOMIC STRUCTURAL DEPRIVATION OF PASTORALISTS AS FOOD PRODUCERS

Such divided and conflictive policy framework has hindered regional economic integration, as well as the definition of a common policy frame for agricultural and rural development in the MENA. However, differences between national policies have been ironed out as development trajectories have converged over time, despite different ideological and institutional approaches. The main differences between the policy frameworks of MENA countries relate mainly to the legacy of the colonial experience, their positioning during the Cold War, and the importance of mineral revenues for each national economy, as this directly reflects on their respective purchasing power in world food markets, and the need to rely on international cooperation.

Following decolonisation in the 1960s, most MENA countries promoted domestic self-sufficiency through support for producers' prices and inputs, as well as with measures aimed at organising and controlling producers and value chain agents. This policy setting was dramatically reconfigured by the severe drought events that have struck the region as from the 1970s, highlighting both the vulnerability of local rural livelihoods and the fragility of national food security systems. Rural populations in most countries underwent dramatic losses and an intense reshaping of livelihood patterns, particularly in arid and semi-arid areas, including through an important resettling of herding households (Karrou et al., 2007). State support during those times aimed at ensuring populations' access to basic items, including production inputs for rural communities. Eventually such emergency measures have been converted into structural production strategies through systems of subsidies and loans, with relevant implications for the evolution of local farming systems (Nori, 2022b).

Since the late 1980s, agricultural policies in most countries have started converging under the auspices of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) regime, which importantly contributed to reshaping State engagement and the institutional setting throughout the rural world, and specifically in remote and inner rangelands. The new policy framework established by SAP paradigms hinged on market liberalisation, resource privatization, and diverse forms of rangeland encroachment. Through major cuts and reorientations of the State budget, SAP measures contributed to undermining the already inefficient public infrastructure and service provision in rural areas. Public expenditure from either State budget or international organisations was allocated to large, intensive farming systems while support to rural smallholders and drylands communities was curtailed, thus, to further weakening the social contract between the State and pastoral communities (Alary, 2006; Dukhan, 2017). The focus on increased production benefited large producers at the expense of rural smallholders who were negatively targeted by national policies and international support, especially those inhabiting drier and remote rangelands (Dutilly-Diane, 2006; Nori, 2019a).

Subsequent waves of economic restructuring in the 1990s included market deregulation and economic integration into global trade; agreements with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the EU increased most countries' reliance on food imports with a view to serving the needs of a growing and diversified urban population (INRA, 2015; Nori, 2019b). The restructuring of the agricultural sector further contributed to crowding off important portions of the rural population towards urban peripheries, thus adding pressure on the territorial setting and also triggering migrations to other regions (Gertel and Breuer, 2007; Nori, 2022b). The scaling down of State support schemes and finances left most producers exposed to market dynamics without adequate buffering nor negotiation skills, or power.

As the current Ukrainian crisis indicates, MENA countries today remain largely and increasingly deficient in food products and dependent on their imports. The livestock sector is no exception, and in order to meet a growing consumption demand from a limited and volatile production setting, State policies pursue, on the one hand, the intensification of livestock production and, on the other hand, an increasing reliance on import trade in food and agricultural inputs, including livestock feed. The high reliance and increasing dependence on market exchanges to satisfy countries' basic needs are the main elements of concern for national politics, as these address the pillars of national food security and, thus, of State legitimacy. In most countries, policies to sustain food self-sufficiency and protect domestic markets (i.e., livestock and cereals) are considered essential to ensure social stability; price support measures, food subsidies to consumers, quota systems and trade barriers are implemented accordingly (Alary and El Mourid, 2005; Dutilly-Diane, 2006; IFAD, 2003).

The intense incorporation into State-led schemes (subsidies, loans, and input supply) and market-driven mechanisms has importantly reconfigured the operational perimeter of pastoralists in most MENA countries and contributed to grossly reducing their economic and political autonomy. From an

exceptional measure to support herds in times of drought, animal feed supplementation has become the main animal production strategy. While the provision of external inputs was justified to decrease producers' exposure during years of scarcity, this strategy provided significant incentives to retain greater numbers of animals, reduce their mobility and integrate agro-pastoral economies into market dynamics (Darghouth and Gharbi, 2011). State-assisted commoditisation of livestock products had become a main production objective for most pastoralists, who are fundamentally conceived as mere livestock producers having to comply with satisfying the demand of an increasingly demanding population (Bourbouze, 2000; Daoud et al., 2016; Gertel and Breuer, 2007; Nori, 2022b).

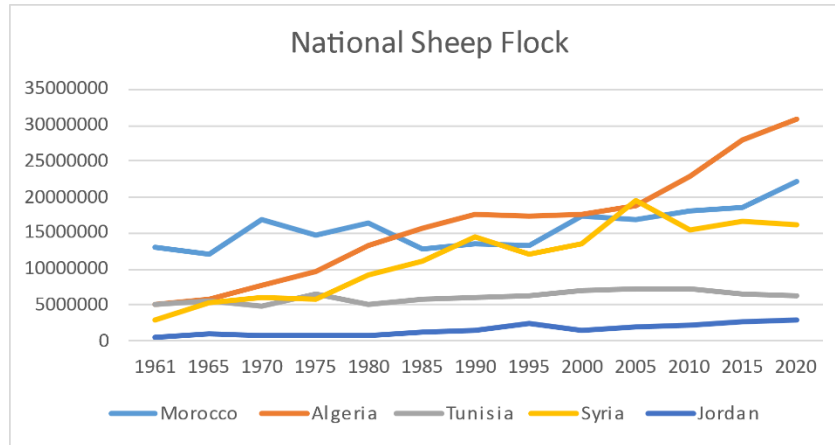


Figure 1: Sheep population trends in some MENA countries (2005-2020) [Source: FAOStat dataset]

While proving very costly for States' coffers, the decoupling of livestock feeding from rangelands' potentials and the growing reliance on external resources contributed as well to the overall detachment of the production and reproduction systems. While contributing, on the one hand, to a fragilisation of dryland ecosystems, on the other, it generated a dramatic dependence on State support and market-driven mechanisms, including on international trade and the global arena for the acquisition of production inputs. Altogether these dynamics held relevant consequences on local communities' capacities to control and manage the core pillars of their livelihoods as well as on their socio-economic conditions. Increasingly high production costs and growing indebtedness, coupled with the volatility of subsidy schemes and market prices, have led to the degradation of socio-economic conditions in most dryland settings (Dhia, 1995).

Pastoral households had to reorganise accordingly to tackle these new and evolving uncertainties; shifting livelihood patterns were marked by a more sedentary living of local populations and a strong preference for more remunerating and less-labour intensive activities (Nefzaoui et al., 2012). In many peripheral rural communities, outmigration has become a mainstream strategy. While this initially addressed expanding urban poles, rural emigrations progressively targeted international routes and patterns (Zuccotti et al., 2018). The income generated and remitted by migrant members is now a relevant financial asset for most pastoral households, specifically to cope with crises (e.g., a drought event or an abrupt spike in the market), or either to take advantage of local opportunities (e.g., expanding the herd or acquiring land). The distant migration of the young rural labour force has significant implications for local development in terms of family configuration, farm structure and labour regimes, including in gender and generational terms (Elloumi et al., 2006; Nori, 2019a).

Overall, the policy framework characterising most MENA countries has aimed at stabilising and intensifying livestock production, thus, to reduce to mobility and flexibility than to underpin pastoral practices. Approaches supporting capital rather than labour-intensive farming systems have proven highly inconsistent in addressing the long-term needs of rural producers and ecosystems, particularly in the vast, rich but fragile dryland steppes and mountainous territories. The longstanding degradation of resource management and livelihood patterns in pastoral territories of MENA holds substantial risk potential in terms of natural hazards and social as well as political insecurity, especially under volatile climatic and economic conditions.

4. A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE EU POLICY FRAME

Europe has a wide and diversified set of extensive grazing livestock systems, which utilize about one-fifth of agricultural land. Across Europe, the pastoralism shows a specific added-value and comparative advantage in mountainous areas and in islands, where the alternative costs for land and labour make it a convenient option compared to other forms of land use. Sheep and goats are reared predominantly in these settings due to their capacity to adapt to harsher soil and climate conditions; without pastoralism large portions of so-defined Less-Favoured Areas (LFAs) would be abandoned and become fallow, with significant ecological consequences. Cattle, pigs, and equines may also be reared in extensive ways, but their significance in pastoral terms is lower than that of small ruminants (EC, 2018; Nori, 2022a).

About 80% of the European sheep and goat flock is concentrated in Spain, Italy, Greece, and southern France which present a wide range of biophysical conditions that cover main types of pastoral systems in the Mediterranean EU region (EUMed) (EC, 2018; Nori and Farinella, 2019). The typical pattern includes grazing systems based on the use of permanent pastures, especially in upland and mountain areas, including through forms of sylvo-pastoralism. Mostly due to Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) incentives and animal health issues, the European sheep population has been growing steadily during the 1980s; it has then been constantly falling since the early 1990s, and this tendency has increased over recent decades, though with different pace in the diverse countries.

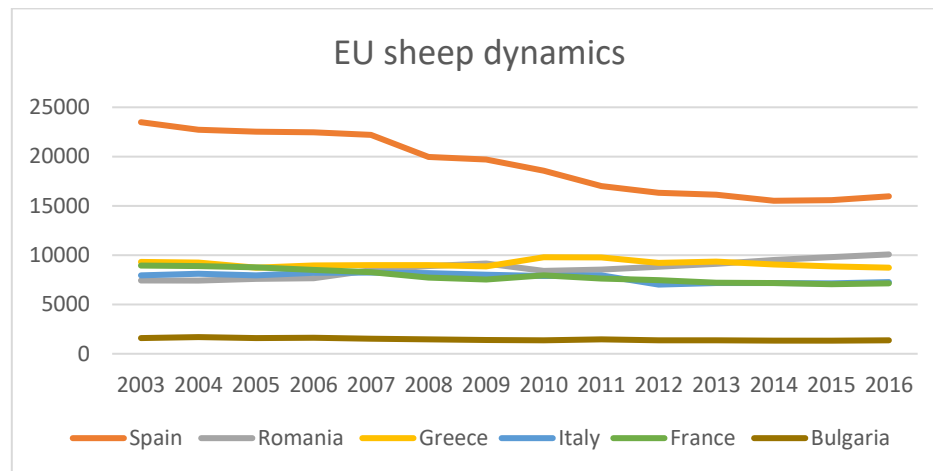


Figure 2: Sheep flock dynamics in main EU countries, 2003-2016 (000s) [Source: EC, 2020]

5. PASTORALISTS AS ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGERS

The policy framework in Europe, quite distinctively from those of other regions, recognizes the multiple values of pastoralism, and its contributions in terms of cultural heritage, environmental management and territorial cohesion. The EU has issued a set of principles and policies to protect pastoral practices in Europe; these are outlined in the CAP and implemented through the subsidiarity principle that characterizes EU governance. This implies that different institutional levels play diverse and complementary roles whereby the more immediate level (often the national or local one) is supposed to have better capacities to implement the principles dictated in the EU Directive (Caballero et al., 2009; Nori and Gemini, 2011).

As one of the founding policies of the EU, the CAP was established in the Treaty of Rome (1957)¹ to increase productivity, enhance farmers' income, stabilise markets, and ensure food supplies and reasonable prices for consumer. For the first two decades it mainly spurred agricultural production within a framework of agricultural modernisation and the development of the global agri-food chain, prompting serious concerns over market distortions and environmental implications. Subsequent CAP reforms have taken into increasingly account evolving societal concerns for a more sustainable and multifunctional

¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-rome>

perspective of EU agriculture. To date CAP remains a strategic pillar of the EU and the main overarching policy regulating rural development that engages a substantial share of the overall EU finances (about 40 per cent of the total budget in 2018). For most European livestock breeders, CAP plays a significant role; its financial support may represent about a half or more of the farm revenue, with trends and variations changing from one country to another depending on local measures and implementation (Fréve, 2015; Nori, 2015; Ragkos and Nori, 2016). The majority of farms would not be viable today without this public support, given that production costs are constantly rising, while prices of sheep and goat products remain mostly stagnant (EC, 2018). The incorporation of European herders into CAP modalities is nevertheless an ambiguous and controversial process: while pastoralists claim autonomy and independence, they also recognise that most farms would cease to exist without institutional support (“*sans les primes, c’est la mort du métier!*”, Fréve, 2015:7). The degree of dependency on CAP measures, mechanisms and funding is high and also implies that any change in the policy framework has a significant impact on the survival of the sector (Bertolozzi-Caredio et al., 2021; EC, 2018; Nori, 2019b).

Overall, the CAP mandate is to provide affordable food for EU citizens and a fair standard of living for farmers, to promote balanced territorial development and sustainable management of natural resources. Two key concepts informing CAP and helping operationalise its principles in pastoral settings are those of Less-Favoured Areas (LFAs) and High Nature Value (HNV). In such evolving context, pastoralists have been increasingly demanded to play their role in managing natural resources and maintaining landscapes in LFA and HNV habitats, including supporting socio-economic development and stabilizing population in marginal settings (Beaufoy and Ruiz-Mirazo, 2013; Nori, 2022a; Nori and Gemini, 2011; Nori and Farinella, 2019).

Accordingly, the European policy frame recognizes that, through grazing, ruminants provide a broad set of environmental benefits, including soil stability, water cycle regulation, biodiversity maintenance, carbon stocking and increased resilience to climate change dynamics (Caballero et al., 2009; Keenleyside et al., 2014). EU remuneration for socio-ecosystem services evolves from the acknowledgement that important societal threats originating in natural settings – such as landslides, forest fires, avalanches, erosional processes and flooding – are mostly due to the growing abandonment of marginal territories, for which the decline in extensive farming systems is a main driving force. This is particularly the case for the Mediterranean EU countryside, a sophisticated mosaic of intertwined human-nature relationships, increasingly challenged the evolving climate change scenarios (ESSEDRA, 2014; EC, 2020).

Initial CAP support led to excess food supply and related market distortions and environmental implications, which eventually induced CAP reforms to better account for different aspects of agriculture within a more sustainable and multifunctional perspective, including specific requirements for environmental protection, food safety, and animal health and welfare. Thereafter, CAP support has increasingly been conditional on compliance with requirements associated to a different set of standardised measures, defined through time as eligibility rules, greening requirements, agro-environmental measures, good agricultural and environmental conditions, and – most recently – voluntary eco-schemes.

A fair analysis of the EU policy frame for agriculture and rural development and its reforms should take into account the wider European policy context as well. This shall include changes in public attitudes and societal concerns, as well as international agreements and commitments. When it comes to pastoralism, two main influential policy domains that have impinged on their institutional setting are those relating to trade agreements and the related marketing of livestock inputs and products, and those concerning the environment and governing the natural resources used by pastoralists.

Since the 1990s, the EU has further accelerated the process of integration into global market dynamics through the engagements with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and other international and bilateral policy trade frameworks. Together with monetary union, WTO and regional trade agreements have deeply facilitated the circulation of agricultural inputs and products. For pastoralists this has meant a further intensification in market competition, as, on top of the livestock products issued from European intensive systems which feed their animals of cheap imported inputs - they also have to compete with those originating from other world regions, specifically New Zealand, Australia, and South America, where production conditions and costs differ widely.

Marketing of pastoral products is, moreover, increasingly challenged by the shifting attitudes in European dietary patterns, with significant decrease in small ruminant’s meat consumption on the one hand. Intra-community trade in live animals amongst EU countries exists as well, mostly depending on

pricing and quality aspects, as well as on shifting consumption patterns. Ireland and the United Kingdom are major exporters of sheep to France; and Romania exports to many south-western countries, and Italy and Spain move small ruminants in different directions. EU countries also export at an increasing rate to other neighbouring regions such as the Middle East and North Africa during specific seasonal festivities (EC, 2018).

Overall, the growing reliance on market mechanisms and the liberalisation of trade exchanges have generated profound uncertainties in production patterns. In spite of a stated concern for LFA and HNV, CAP 'rural welfare' is widely criticised for the inability to offset the negative trends affecting the agrarian world, particularly in its less-favoured settings where producers are increasingly dependent on subsidy schemes, and rural populations continue to decline, remaining socially and politically marginalised.

The CAP has played a substantial and ambivalent role in agricultural modernization through the restructuring of the global agri-food chain, which has furthered territorial polarisation (Nori, 2019b; Nori and Gemini, 2011; Nori and Scoones, 2018). The pillars of pastoral production systems - land, livestock and labour- have been deeply reconfigured by successive CAP reforms, with relevant implications for farm management, economic performance and livelihood levels. Pasturelands in Europe are currently subject to diverse patterns and tensions. Territorial polarisation implies the intensification of land use in certain areas and related over-grazing and degradational phenomena, while other pasturelands are increasingly abandoned, with under-grazing triggering shrub encroachment and land conversion into closed, woody areas amid expanding and forms of socio-economic desertification. Other pastoral areas are encroached by new economic interests and policy agendas and, thus, converted into natural reserves, tourist and leisure areas, intensive crop farming, forestry plantations, energy suppliers (i.e., dams, windmills, biofuel farming), where pastoral producers are seldom part of the equation (MAA, 2018).

The living and working conditions in mountainous, island, or inner territories are today tougher, the quality of basic services and facilities limited, and opportunities for employment and income fewer. In these settings, family farming has become a decreasingly viable enterprise, and an unattractive option for local youth, as attested by the demographic ageing of rural communities and problems and generational renewal and socio-economic desertification. Trends and figures are particularly dramatic in EU Mediterranean pastoral regions, which lose about 30 per cent of their pastoral farms every 10 years (EC, 2020; EuroStat, 2016; Nori, 2022a; Nori and Farinella, 2019).

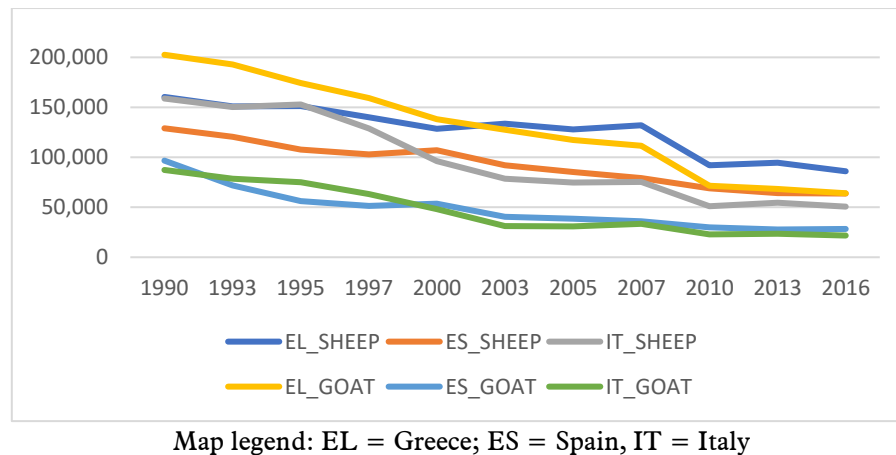


Figure 3: Trends in small ruminant farms in Greece, Spain and Italy (1990-2016) [Source: Nori and Farinella, 2019 on EuroStat data]

The reconfiguration of pastoral farm management has also carried relevant implications for workforce patterns and labour regimes, with the challenges related to the decreasing availability of workforce. Difficult living and working conditions and poor economic returns make shepherding a poorly appreciated profession. While the average age of agricultural entrepreneurs is normally higher than any other economic sector, the figures for pastoral farms are higher than any other agricultural sub-sector. One-third of pastoral farmers are over 65 in Spain and over 60 in France, while in Ireland and the United Kingdom half of sheep farmers are over 55. In both old and the new EU Member States the

average age of farmers is rising, and the change of generations is a long way off (EP, 2008; Nori, 2017; Pastomed, 2007).

Due to the decreasing availability of a skilled and motivated workforce, in recent decades, most European farms have survived with the labour and services of foreign shepherds from neighbouring regions. The origin of the pastoral workforce has in fact changed from family members to salaried labourers, and lately from local to foreign workers, either from the EU eastern flanks (Romanian and Bulgarians have long fed the shepherding labour market in Italy, Greece and Spain), the Balkans (Albanians and North Macedonians especially in Greece and Italy), and Maghreb (especially from Morocco to Spain, France and Italy). Over time these flows are being replaced by migrant labour from southern African and eastern Asian regions (Nori, 2015). The growing presence of immigrants has come to offset the decline and ageing local rural population, providing European pastoral farms with a cheap and quite skilled labour force. While this phenomenon helps temporarily fill the vacuum, the immigrants' limited integration into the fabric of local communities threatens their scaling up as farm entrepreneurs, hence limiting options for a generational renewal (Nori, 2022a; Kasimis, 2010; Nori and Farinella, 2019).

Overall, despite policy efforts and financial investment, pastoralist today in Europe remains poorly remunerated in social and economic terms, and, as a consequence, it is decreasingly practiced by European citizens (Nori and Farinella, 2019; PACTORES, 2021; Pastomed, 2007). In an economic context organised around trade liberalization and free market, CAP efforts to compensate for those producers who operate in difficult conditions, or that incorporate social and environmental externalities in their farming systems thus bearing higher production costs, seemingly ineffective.

6. CONCLUSION: INVESTING IN THE MARGINS

Throughout the Mediterranean, much likely as in the rest of the world, agro-pastoral systems are being increasingly integrated into wider societal dynamics, and ecological uncertainties are progressively complemented by those generated in the market and policy domains. Despite the increasing societal demand for the products and the services provided by agro-pastoral systems, these remain poorly recognised and quite marginalised in policy decision-making, socio-economic developments and in the broader institutional setup.

In order to redress these dynamics, pastoralism should be appreciated as the most effective system to maintain a productive and sustainable human presence in the mountainous and arid areas of the Mediterranean region. This is particularly required in the Mediterranean region, in a context characterised by climate change, demographic asymmetries in demographic and resource allocation terms, and the related growing requirements for food sovereignty.

Consequently, policy measures, public investments and support systems should take better account of the specificities and potentials of extensive livestock production. These should translate in adequately appreciating and compensating farms and people who decide to invest their lives and professions in producing food in harsh areas and difficult conditions, while providing society with important public goods and positive environmental externalities that are not remunerated by market mechanisms.

Such a policy shift should capitalise on the evolving social demands for the products, services and public goods provided through pastoral resource management, and the associated externalities reflected in landscape and biodiversity, animal welfare, organic production and the contribution to other relevant economic dimensions, from food marketing to rural tourism and environmental protection. Environmental, labour- and trade-related policies should as well better sustain the social and ecological benefits of agro-pastoral practices. In the Mediterranean these would include a better governance of existing livestock value chains, mechanisms favouring strategies to adapt to climate change and measures to support the integration of a foreign workforce

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This article is 100% contributed by the sole author. He conceived and designed the research or analysis, collected the data, contributed to data analysis & interpretation, wrote the article, performed critical revision of the article/paper, edited the article, and supervised and administered the field work.

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Has this research used human subjects for experimentation? No

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