

HOW TO INTERPRET SUSTAINABILITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

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Introduction

The Mediterranean has always been a centre of attention for its rich and diverse historical and cultural heritage and its natural heritage, hence one of the leading tourist destinations in the world. Besides it has been a major trading place since ancient times. Consequently, intense human impact on the ecological systems is very discernible in the Mediterranean basin. Despite old recorded hot spots in the region, ecological footprints first hit the international agenda by the marine pollution in the 1970s which bring the Mediterranean environment into the limelight in a different way.

Since the 1970s, there is an increasing concern to protect the Mediterranean environment¹. Initial efforts to protect the marine environment in the region highlighted the ecological integrity of marine and land resources and the impact of environmental degradation on social and economic activities. With regard to the social, cultural and biological diversity and richness of the Mediterranean, sustainability with its all dimensions is therefore a particular concern for the region.

This article hence aims to contribute to the contemporary attempts to reflect on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership process and

¹ To illustrate: the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) which was accepted as the cornerstone of cooperation on environmental protection in the region was founded in 1975 under the auspices of UNEP to protect the Mediterranean environment and prevent pollution. The Barcelona Convention, as its legal framework was established in 1975 including five protocols and came into force in 1978 and it was amended in 1995 (Kütting, 2000, 62-63). Amended version of the Convention brought a new policy approach which changed “pollutant-centred policy” into “integrative strategy” (Conrads et al 2003:6). Through this change, MAP targets a comprehensive and cross-sectoral integration of numerous socio-economic factors. To that end, for instance integrated coastal area management became one of the focal areas of MAP (Conrads et al 2003:6).

ecological sustainability with a view to enhancing the social and economic sustainability in the region.

The reason for such an inquiry is twofold. The first is the fact that while the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership process right from the start defined the areas of cooperation in the Mediterranean region, it focuses for the most part on trade liberalization with the target of gradual establishment of a free trade area by 2010². Environment and sustainable development are priority areas within the financial and economic chapter which mainly aims at enhancing sustainable economic and social development for the region. The wealth of research on free trade and the environment exhibits both positive and negative impacts of trade liberalisation on environment. So far, such studies reveal that sustainable development is still in most part linked to sustainable economic growth in spite of the growing concern for ecological sustainability and the efforts to integrate the environmental objectives into other key areas of social and economic development. Indeed, it is yet far from certain with regard to environmental concerns and objectives whether assumptions on welfare and environmental protection (that increased prosperity and welfare will lead to environmental protection) always works in all conditions or whether such a responsive relationship provides the necessary conditions to halt the environmental degradation in time; in other words how the time dimension is integrated into this assumed relationship constitutes a very important question.

² For a brief remark Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has three objectives which are: 1. The creation of an area of peace and stability based on the principles of human rights and democracy. 2. The creation of an area of shared prosperity through the progressive establishment of free trade between the EU and its Mediterranean partners and amongst the partners themselves accompanied by substantial EU financial support for economic transition and for helping the partners to confront the social and economic challenges created by this transition. 3. The improvement of mutual understanding among the peoples of the region and the development of a free and flourishing civil society by means of exchange, development of human resources, and the support of civil societies and social development (see European Commission, 2000:7, Conrads *et al* 2003; 7-9).

As to the second point, controversies on the concept and practice of development and sustainable development draw attention to the main themes around the long-term “sustainability” indicators in the region, as is predominantly the case in the rest of the world. Apparently, it is not always easy to assess overall sustainability although the principle of sustainability has a worldwide recognition. Sustainability is a multifaceted concept which includes a broad range of considerations in practice. Indeed social sustainability and ecological sustainability are the essential components of sustainable development along with economic sustainability. Sustainable development is evidently an ambitious and highly contested concept. Some even argue that “sustainable development” is itself a self-contradiction. Nevertheless sustainable development, at least in theory and for intellectual exercise “opens up the possibility of a restructuring of contemporary economic, social and environmental relations” (Connelly and Smith 2003:5). Yet its principal assumptions are generally oversimplified to favour win-win conditions and cost-benefit analysis which overemphasize the economic considerations. Such an interpretation, however, poses new challenges for sustainability in the Mediterranean region and elsewhere.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Environment

Since 1973, the European Commission has been producing multi-annual environmental action programmes to set the objectives and guidelines for environmental policy at the European level. To date each environmental action programme has highlighted different environmental considerations; however, all clearly pointed out a shift from a sectoral to an integrated approach in environmental policy-making. Accompanied by the worldwide recognition of sustainable development, the principle of environmental policy integration has also gained a new momentum at the European Level. Consequently the Fifth Environmental Action Programme (EAP) entitled *Towards Sustainability* (1992-1999) set long-term objectives for reaching sustainability and put greater emphasis on the European Union’s global approach. The Sixth Environmental Action Programme entitled *Environment 2010: Our Future Our Choice* (2001-2010), based on the assessments of the Fifth EAP,

has set four priority areas which are the integral part of European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development as well. These priorities are; climate change, nature and biodiversity, environment, health and quality of life and natural resources and waste.

When the European Union launched its strategy for sustainable development in 2001, it vigorously underlined six priority areas³. These priority areas also correspond to the main- present and potential- challenges to sustainable development. The European Union strategy for sustainable development has also an external dimension, as zealously stressed by the European Commission. Moreover in the Sixth EAP it was stated that cooperation with neighbouring states such as Mediterranean states was a prerequisite for promoting the initiatives and actions to protect environment at the global level. In another document, *Towards a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development*, the European Commission affirmed the contribution of the European Union to sustainable development at the global level (COM, 2002:3)⁴.

³ European Commission published a proposal for sustainable development in May 2001 which was endorsed by the Gothenburg European Council in June 2001. See for further information A Sustainable Europe for A Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development COM (2001) 264. Six priority areas for sustainable development strategy of European Union are:

- climate change and clean energy
- public health
- management of natural resources
- poverty and social exclusion
- ageing and demography
- mobility, land use and territorial development (European Commission, 2002)

⁴ “The European Union is well placed to assume a leading role in the pursuit of global sustainable development. It is the world’s largest donor of development aid, the world’s biggest trading partner, and a major source of direct private investments. It has developed and promoted a great number of clean technologies. Throughout its own evolution, the European model of integration has been based on pursuing mutually supportive strategies for stable economic growth, social development and environmental protection. Investing in a shared future with its closest neighbours is fundamental to the European Union’s own long-term stability. More especially, European Union enlargement is based on a programme of assistance which aims at political stability, sound economic

Within this document, there is a firm recognition that poverty as well as consumption patterns in the rich parts of the society in the world is one of the major causes of environmental degradation which sets primary obstacles on the way to sustainable development (COM, 2002:10).

Besides, with reference to Doha Development Agenda and Millennium Development Goals, priority objectives for sustainable development were set forth and trade for sustainable development was presented to maximize the benefits of globalisation⁵. The European Union, herewith, asserted that regional trade agreements should support sustainable development and that it was in favour of such trade agreements to address regulatory issues ranging from environment to competition (COM 2002:8).

In that sense, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership is a suitable platform to accomplish its sustainable development strategy in the region. Indeed the environment was one of the six priority areas for regional economic integration in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership which was launched at the 1995 Barcelona Conference. The Short and Medium-term Priority Environmental Action Programme (SMAP) was also adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on the Environment, which was held in Helsinki on 28 November 1997. In brief SMAP is a framework programme of action for the protection of the Mediterranean

conditions, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. This will provide valuable experience for tackling the same challenges at the global level (COM, 2002:6)".

⁵ Millennium Development Goals are "1. Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, 2. Achieving universal primary education 3. Promoting gender equality and empowering women 4. Reducing child mortality 5. Improving maternal health 6. Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, 7. Ensuring environmental sustainability 8. Developing a global partnership for development (OECD, 2003; 128-129)". The Doha Development Agenda was launched at the fourth WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha in November 2001 through which trade capacity building became the focal point of trade negotiations (OECD, 2003:142).

environment within the context of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The MEDA programme, which is the chief financial instrument for the implementation of the Euro-Med Partnership, provides technical and financial support for the economic and social reforms. To that end, the 2005-2006 Regional Indicative Programme of MEDA considers the environment and sustainable development within the internal market approximation programme “Programme on regulatory approximation in the fields of the neighbourhood policy and completion of the Euro-Mediterranean free trade area” while in the 2002-2006 Regional Strategy Paper environmental protection and sustainable development were listed among policy objectives to be supported to tackle common regional challenges affecting sustainability in the Mediterranean⁶.

In the recent regional indicative programme of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership there are also two fervent references to sustainable development (MEDA, 2004). The first one is about the ever-increasing interdependence between its neighbours and the EU with regard to stability, security and sustainable development and the second one is about the EU’s global commitment to sustainable development⁷.

⁶ Furthermore in the 2002-2004 Regional Indicative Programme “promoting the sustainability of the Euro-Mediterranean Integration” was one of the five priority areas (MEDA, 2004:3).

⁷ “...the communication on “Wider Europe and the New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours” sets out a new framework for relations over the coming decade with the Southern Mediterranean. The Communication notes the growing interdependence between the EU and its neighbouring partners in terms of stability, security and sustainable development (MEDA, 2004:5)”. “A global commitment to the cause of sustainable development was restated at the Johannesburg Summit, through an ambitious action-oriented programme with clear and measurable objectives, demonstrating the increasing importance of environmental issues in achieving the Millennium Development Goal. The key areas for EU action are water and energy. In Johannesburg, the EU launched two partnerships, on water and sanitation and on energy for the poor (MEDA, 2004:6)”.

Sustainable Development and Trade

Sustainability is not a new concept although combining “sustainable” and “development” only goes back to the early 1970s (Dryzek, 1997:124). On the surface, sustainable development challenges the well-established assumption that environmental protection and economic growth and development could not be reached at the same time or in other words challenge the view that the two are totally incompatible⁸. The radical switch - from the traditional view of zero-sum situation (either environment or economy) to win-win situations (environment and economy/development) challenges the deep greens perception of radical change in the society. Despite the radical shift that took place in the economy-environment axis, sustainable development, in appearance, offers a smooth transition with regard to the integration of green values into the policy-making structures. Therefore the prevalent free trade and environment debate also has its roots in this particular interpretation of the environment and economy relationship.

There are two dominant views on the liberalisation of trade and environment; On the one hand are those who argue that trade liberalisation and subsequent economic growth gradually lead to the environmental protection and increased environmental quality; on the other hand are those who argue that environment degradation is likely to increase due to unsustainable economic growth and particularly recent that multilateral trade agreements do

⁸ At its core, sustainable development, regardless of the different interpretations, has the following elements:

“1.Environment-economy integration: ensuring that economic development and environmental protection are integrated in planning and implementation 2. Futurity: an explicit concern about the impact of current activity on future generations. 3. Environmental protection: a commitment to reducing pollution and environmental degradation and to the more efficient use of resources. 4. Equity: a commitment to meeting at least the basic needs of the poor of the present generation (as well as equity between generations). 5. Quality of life: a recognition that human well-being is constituted by more than just income growth. 6. Participation: the recognition that sustainable development requires the political involvement of all groups or ‘stakeholders’ in society (Jacobs, 1999; 26-27)”.

not produce desired environmental quality but rather end up with inequality which will in turn end up with more pressure on the environment (McCarthy, 2004:328). Within the context of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the impact of free trade on the environment is of a critical concern as well. The Mediterranean Commission for Sustainable Development, Mediterranean Environmental Technical Assistance Programme, and Blue Plan made studies on the both negative and positive impacts of free trade and environment. Nevertheless it is not easy to reach a concrete conclusion since levels of economic development and state of the environment vary across the region.

Besides these two mainstream perspectives on trade and environment there is another perspective which sees the trade agreements as tools to improve environmental governance while recognizing the negative impacts of increasing free trade (McCarthy, 2004:328). This view is often associated with the ecological modernisation debate.

In practical terms, ecological modernisation has recently gained wide-spread recognition from all the actors in the society. At first sight ecological modernisation offers more precise programmes and plans (and tools to implement them) for reaching sustainability when compared to contentious sustainable development. Therefore it would not be inaccurate to argue that ecological modernisation is a kind of response to the uncertainty surrounding contemporary societies due to the unprecedented environmental challenges and consequences of long-ignored environmental problems and at the same time a new reading of risk-society. In that sense, environmental problems are generally regarded as management problems and markets become sensitive to the costs of environmental degradation since environment is not a free good at all (Connelly and Smith, 2003:67). Ecological modernisation, thus, economises the ecology while trying to reach the desired “sustainability”. However it also aims to ecologise the economy or in other words “with ecological modernisation contemporary societies have found themselves a highly suitable strategy for organising the peaceful transition to a politics of nature... (Blühdorn, 2000:209)”.

The emergence of ecological modernisation coincided with the time when the neo-liberal economic approaches and political modernisation were on the rise. It also represents a shift from command and control approach to market-based instruments. Ecological modernisation as a discourse or a policy paradigm is therefore usually regarded as a technical subject and only for industry. However the transformation or reconfiguration on which it focuses is about the entire society. Nevertheless, when the weak form of ecological modernisation is adopted, the result would be technical solutions to environmental problems rather than dealing with the real causes of environmental degradation (Dryzek, 1997). This position, however, raises a critical question; whether eco-economy means only cleaner production and products or also reflects a worldwide change in consumption and living styles⁹.

Sustainability and the Mediterranean

According to the 1999 European Environment Agency research, the situation of open seas in the Mediterranean is generally good while there is increasing pollution and environmental degradation in the coastal areas (EEA, 1999). The problem in the area is more often the hot spot pollution in the region (EEA, 1999).

The Mediterranean environment includes a semi-enclosed sea with rich but also fragile marine and land ecosystems. Mediterranean coastal zones are also precious for their historical and cultural richness. Nevertheless social, cultural and ecological diversity and richness provide both challenges and opportunities for the region. It is the leading tourist destination area due to its landscape and

⁹ “Socio-economic development is an open-ended historical process, which depends , at least in part, on human imagination, projects and decisions subject to the constraints of the natural environment and the burden of the living past (history). Our species is the only one capable of inventing its future and of transforming its environment...Thus, development may be understood as an intentional, self-guided process of transformation and management of socio-economic structures, directed at guaranteeing all people an opportunity to lead a full and rewarding life by providing them with decent livelihoods and by continuously improving their well-being, whatever the concrete content given to these goals by different societies in different periods of time (Sachs, 1999:29)”.

history. Tourism revenues account for the largest share in most of the Mediterranean states. Tourism however engenders some negative effects on the environment. For example, the construction of hotels, vacation houses, roads and so on for the development of tourism produce negative impact on the coastal and marine ecosystems in the Mediterranean region.

Fresh water is a very critical resource in the Mediterranean and regardless of differences in the rainfall and hydrological cycle is under strong pressure in various parts of the Mediterranean (IUCN, 2003). Nevertheless, the ever-growing tourism sector demands more fresh water for leisure and consumption especially in the season when the rainfall is very low. Therefore tourism has a remarkable impact on freshwater resources in the region. Over-exploitation of ground water resources, pollution of surface and ground water, and degradation of sensitive wetlands are some of the damaging effects that intensive tourism and tourism related activities caused on the coastal Mediterranean. Supply and quality of fresh water resources in the near future certainly depend on the current consumption patterns in the region (IUCN, 2003). Moreover in view of destabilizing effects of climate change on the hydrological cycle, contemporary consumption levels and patterns of fresh water resources put a significant burden on fresh water resources in the region.

Besides the negative impacts of tourism, the Mediterranean environment is also prone to degradation due to intensive agriculture, urban growth and sprawl, high maritime traffic, concentration of population and economic activities on coastal areas, and high population growth¹⁰. The Agriculture and processing industry are certainly of major significance for most Mediterranean countries. These two sectors, in spite of their contribution to the welfare and socio-economic structure, have also negative effects on environment. There are, however, some socio-economic changes in the region, such as rapid urbanisation which

¹⁰ According to the forecasts the population of the 21 Mediterranean countries could reach 524 million by the year 2025 (UNEP *et al*, 2003:25).

engenders environmental degradation, have also negative effects on agriculture. Rapid urbanisation in Mediterranean countries causes irreversible destruction of fragile ecosystems and farming potential (UNEP *et al* 2003:29). Concentration of population and economic activities in coastal areas (coastalisation or littoralisation) together with construction and urbanisation related to tourism and associated activities bring about the artificialisation in the region as well¹¹. There are numerous reasons behind the artificialisation in the coastal areas; destructuring of traditional inland economies and societies, the development of economic activities near urban areas and coastlines, rapid development of national and international tourism are the primary ones, among others (UNEP *et al*, 2003:25). In turn, artificialisation mainly causes flooding risk and landslides as well as degradation of urban life styles and ever-growing costs of urban infrastructures along with its negative impacts on the environment.

Nevertheless, urban growth and sprawl are not only related to tourism and economic activities in the coastal areas. Changes in life styles and the demand for more spacious living environments also trigger and accelerate the artificialisation in the coastal areas while threatening the Mediterranean landscapes and wetlands (UNEP, *et al* 2003:26). Development of transport infrastructures and the increasing numbers of private cars facilities this trend especially in the Northern Mediterranean countries (UNEP, *et al*, 2003:26).

All in all, these social and economic changes create a kind of vicious circle. Negative human impact on land nevertheless depends on the nature of the land used for urbanisation. Certainly, human impact or ecological footprints would not be the same for a land with high farming potential or a desert (UNEP, *et al* 2003: 29). However human impact on environment can go beyond the thresholds of ecological integrity regardless of ecosystem classifications, and challenge the entire environment.

¹¹ “Country to city migration and littoralisation are now becoming especially important in Turkey and certain other countries of the Southern and eastern Mediterranean (UNEP *et al*, 2003:25)”.

Concluding Remarks

The Mediterranean has always been at the centre stage of politics, with dynamic and fragile features. Now it has an ever-growing population accompanied with trends which are likely to jeopardize social, economic and ecological sustainability in the region. The European Union, as part of its sustainable development strategy, has wider sustainability considerations well beyond its borders. Political stability also has close connections with better allocation of resources, increased welfare and economic development in the region. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, within this context, offers insightful perspectives and opportunities for environmental protection. Nevertheless, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership mainly focuses on the establishment of a free trade area for increasing prosperity and enhancing the peace in the region. Sustainable development is, certainly, an integral part of the Partnership though the structure of Partnership offers a limited initiative. Environment, energy, water and industrial cooperation are, hence, among the main priority areas of the partnership in order to accelerate the harmonisation of regulatory policies. In other words, since nature and natural resources are key elements of socio-economic development, the environment and other related areas such as energy took their place under the economic and financial partnership for creating the area of shared prosperity. In line with this argument, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership can also be regarded as development cooperation and a proximity policy (MEDA, 2004:7).

In other local and global initiatives of the European Union, such as in the European Commission Communication *Wider Europe-Our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, the environment is, however, generally regarded with a negative value such as environmental hazards and pollution, in other words there is an explicit association of the environment with security considerations¹².

¹² "...threats to mutual security, whether from the transborder dimension of environmental and nuclear hazards, communicable diseases, illegal immigration, trafficking, organisational crime.... Will require joint approaches in order to be

Only under one heading; *A new vision and new offer*, is sustainable development emphasized¹³. The following statement from the European Commission Communication on *Towards a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development* also demonstrates how the environment is usually associated with security considerations:

“While these problems are of a global scope and need to be tackled at that level, regional and sub-regional action is also needed both to prevent environmental degradation and to combat its effects. For example, in some regions, lack of water resources and land degradation are at the source of local conflicts, which if exacerbated, could become security threats. The European Union should attach particular priority to promoting regional and sub-regional responses to environment and security challenges within Europe and the Mediterranean” (COM 2002:13).

Apparently, the Mediterranean is usually considered as a region where cultural and historical dynamics set the confines of sustainability and where scarce resources are the centre stage of politics paving the way for political instability and non-cooperative attitudes (Redclift, 1999). Along the lines of such interpretations there are also some other proposals for enhancing the “green front” of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (Conrads, *et al*, 2003). For instance one of those proposals is to search the options for co-operation between the Mediterranean Action Plan and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The basis of this proposal is the assumption that these initiatives have a common element, which is sustainable development.

The way forward seems to be clear: both Mediterranean initiatives, albeit coming from different backgrounds, external relations and security on the one hand, environmental protection on the other,

addressed comprehensively (COM, 2003:6)” “...to tackle transboundary threats-from terrorism to air borne pollution (COM, 2003:3)”.

¹³ “Sustainable development requires a common understanding that the adoption of a broader range of policies, including environmental protection will support more rapid economic growth (COM, 2003:9).”

endorse the same corner post for the future of the Mediterranean region: sustainable development (Conrads *et al*, 2003:17).

Yet there are various ways to interpret sustainability and sustainable development itself in the region and within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership aims at sustainable economic and social sustainable development supporting North-South cooperation and South-South integration through economic liberalisation for reaching region-wide sustainability. Restructuring and strengthening the economy and society, increasing welfare and prosperity would be a very important step to that end, but not the final phase for achieving sustainable development. The vicious circle on the life styles and urban sprawl is a good indicator in this context. Damaged environment and degraded life quality due to intensive urbanisation force people to move beyond the borders of cities for a better living environment while damaging the pristine natural areas through constructing wider roads and more spacious houses. Therefore the changes in the socio-economic development are at the heart of the politics of the environment.

To date, environmental protection in the Mediterranean has experienced a gradual change from a sectoral to an integrated environmental policy approach which can be considered as a success story for regional environmental cooperation. Prevention and mitigation of negative environmental outcomes, however, need further exploration of the interpretation of socio-economic development in the region. Moreover, environmental challenges which are closely linked with economic growth and affluence defy intragenerational equity in the overall region. To illustrate, those who will benefit from mass tourism and from increased life standards might not be the same persons who possibly could suffer from a degraded environment due to construction-related tourism or over-consumption of water resources. Certainly the welfare and prosperity would be shared by the whole society but the immediate effects could be detrimental to the environment and deplorable in their impact on certain socio-economic groups.

On the whole, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership can be considered as a scheme for sustainability in the region. However, particularly the ecological dimension of this scheme seems far from sufficient to reach overall sustainability in the region. Although the European Commission reinvigorated the Barcelona Process in 2000, neither the environment nor sustainable development has yet a separate chapter or has a special and stronger emphasis especially under the third pillar of the partnership; but instead both are still dealt with within the economic and financial development chapter as one of the priorities for regional economic integration. However, strengthening the bottom-up approach on environment and sustainability would result in better outcomes since regulatory policies can only partially stimulate the change the sustainability highlights. Thus, the European Union might have missed a big opportunity to enhance its sustainable development strategy and facilitate environmental protection in the Mediterranean by not putting greater emphasis on the environment and sustainable development in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership with a different perspective other than its traditional focus maintains.

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Abstract

European Union strategy for sustainable development certainly touches upon the very essence of the future challenges of the European Project. This strategy also has an external dimension through which the European Union tries to diffuse its principles worldwide and particularly in the neighbouring regions. The Mediterranean region is of a greater significance for the European Union not only because it has new Mediterranean Member States but also because cooperation on environment in the Mediterranean reflects the presumed assumptions on development and environment and North-South debate.

Furthermore, taking into account the challenges of the fifth enlargement, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership should be examined with a view to assessing its contribution to the sustainability in the region. The vicious circle of free-trade versus environmental concerns and projections on globalisation, urbanisation, development, civil-society/state relations and many other related issues need to be included in the further inquiries.

This study, therefore, does not aim at underlining a North-South confrontation; on the contrary it aims at creating better incentives for dialogue and for mutual understanding of the environmental concerns in order to strengthen and to foster cooperation in the region and at the EU level.