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PANEL 14: NORTH AFRICA AND MIDDLE EAST: FOOD SECURITY,
DIVERSIFICATION AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

ORGANIZER AND CHAIRPERSON

Hassan Sergini (Ministry of Agriculture, Morocco)

PANEL DISCUSSANT

Food Security in the Middle East and North Africa Region *Nour El Din
Mona (Aleppo University, Syria)*

RAPPORTEUR

Claudia Ringler (IFPRI)*

This session focused on an important issue in the Arab world that includes economics as well as politics and trade. It was hampered by the fact that logistic problems meant that there was only a single opener, though her remarks did lead to a stimulating debate. Nour El Din Mona stressed that the difficulties in the region are multifarious. Agricultural production is mainly rainfed, leading to risk and uncertainty, combined with low levels of income. Problems are exacerbated by the pressure on natural resources and high population growth (2.5–2.8 per cent). As food production in the region has not been able to meet the demand, imports have increased substantially. At present this results in balance of payment problems in most countries of the region. Malnutrition and undernutrition are prevalent, especially among the landless, small farmers and the unemployed.

The contribution of agriculture to the GNP varies markedly in the different countries of the region, ranging from 5 per cent to as much as 65 per cent. Nevertheless, agriculture will have to play an important role in the future. Intensification is one necessary component in the drive to increase agricultural exports (especially the gaps in cereal, crops, dairy and livestock production) and to minimize imports. Water is seen as the major resource constraint and technologies will have to be improved in this area to avoid problems such as flooding, waterlogging and salinity.

Optimistic versus pessimistic points of view

The main point discussed during the debate was whether the issue of food security in the Arab countries is truly as dismal as it might appear to be, or whether it could not be viewed in a more positive light. The group taking the pessimistic side pointed out that there is a vicious circle of an increasing population depleting the resource base. The countries in question are politically unstable (in general, it is only those which are politically stable, such as Morocco or Egypt, which are progressing). They also tend to have policies which favour their consumers, thus reducing profits for farmers.

While the production of export crops could be a solution, protectionist European Union policies hinder exports from the Arab region. On the other hand, there is a lack of competitiveness for classic export fruits such as citrus and olive oil (Spain produces these more cheaply) while at the same time there is an increase in local demand for these products as well as a lack of continuous flow, so necessary for successful exporting. Problems in resource management in general, and water management in particular, are responsible.

The rather small number of discussants proposing a more optimistic view stressed that the food security situation is more complex. Rainfed agriculture remains important, water is not as scarce as is sometimes implied and, with better management, yields in the region could be improved. It was stressed that there is a lack of water-saving efforts and up-to-date cooperation in water management does not exist. Water is still considered a free commodity, leading, for example, to salinization in the Euphrates basin.

Few disagreed with this analysis, though the emphasis on the general merits of rainfed agriculture were probably overstated. For example, in Egypt, wheat production yields 5.2 tons per hectare, while in Morocco and other (rainfed) areas yields are only around one ton per hectare. This is likely to be particularly important in the case of higher-value crops, which offer greater opportunities for poorer farmers to obtain satisfactory incomes.