

THE
MEDITERRANEAN
REGION AND
THE NEW
INTERNATIONAL
CONTEXT

Current trends and future challenges

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1. Introduction

"The Mediterranean is not just a sea; it is a crossroads of memory and forgetting, of encounters and separations, where the past constantly dialogues with the present."

Predrag Matvejević, 1987

The global order is experiencing significant changes. The decline of U.S. leadership, the rise of China, and the emergence of new global actors are reshaping the Western liberal order (Ikenberry, 2020). The hyper-globalisation model, characterised by recurrent financial crises and rising inequalities, has led to a decline in faith in open trade and economic integration as the most effective means for achieving prosperity. This has resulted in a resurgence of national sovereignty and self-determination, driven by the support of those who have been left behind by globalisation (Rodrik and Walt, 2021). The progress of global governance in adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change has been extremely sluggish. Finally, the emergence of new digital technologies, some of which have disruptive effects, is creating new possibilities that will necessitate public regulation, a necessity that is currently absent.

The Mediterranean, also, is experiencing significant changes. Nationalist and populist movements have gained momentum, intensifying tensions over migration, security, and international law. A reverse of individual and collective freedoms has occurred, especially in those political regimes that have been unable to capitalize on the impulse of the Arab Spring period. The involvement from foreign powers in the region has contributed to jeopardizing diplomatic and institutional relations across countries, deepening regional political instability. Recently, the dramatic escalation of the Israel-Hamas conflict since October 2023 has further destabilize the region, directly affecting neighboring states such as Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan and attracting the attention of the entire international community on the region. Included US President, Donald Trump, whose proposal to seize control of the Gaza Strip was widely seen as a provocation that further agitated the region.

Despite stark divergences between conflict-affected states and relatively stable economies in the region, no Mediterranean country is on track to fully meet the SDGs by 2030. Migration remains a significant issue, with over 500,000 migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean between 2019 and 2023, placing considerable strain on Southern European countries and exacerbating humanitarian concerns. The COVID 19 pandemic of 2020-2022 exposed systemic weaknesses in public health systems, with Italy and Spain suffering high mortality rates and North Africa and the Balkans struggling to manage the crisis. Meanwhile, the Ukraine war has exacerbated economic vulnerabilities, with shortages in basic goods and rising energy prices.

Along with this scenario of increasing complexity and insecurity, advancing predictions regarding which order will eventually emerge in the region is surely a risky operation. Given these obstacles, this report takes a different approach. Instead of trying to predict what the future order in the Mediterranean will be, the report addresses two main questions: **Which are the main current challenges in the Mediterranean region?** And, **which economic, political and social aspects of the Mediterranean region are unlikely to change in the short-to-medium term?**

To answer the questions, the report considers the framework of the 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the SDGs in the Mediterranean region. First, the Agenda remains the common and shared vision towards sustainability, officially endorsed by the UN. Secondly, the monitoring process of the Agenda provides the most update evidence, thanks to reliable figures and data produced by main statistical offices and international organizations. Methodologically, instead of considering all the 17 SDGs, the report uses the 5P Principles framework that allows a more systemic analysis (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, Partnership). Given the nature of the report, the goal is not to be exhaustive but to select some of the most salient challenges that will affect the Mediterranean region in the next years.

2. The Mediterranean region today: an outlook

The global challenges of sustainable development are still profound: 700 million people, mainly in South Saharan Africa and South Asia, are affected by extreme poverty. Environmental and social crises continue to worsen, while multilateralism and cooperation are undercut by deep divisions among the major powers. Global progress towards the SDGs has stalled since 2020 and **the international community now accepts that the SDGs will not be achieved in the original time frame** (Sachs et al., 2024).

Along this scenario, the Mediterranean region is facing significant challenges in achieving human development while avoiding negative environmental and social trade-offs. Table 1 shows the status of the implementation of the SDGs in the Mediterranean region. Most of the targets present serious delays. Since 2020, SDG progress has been stagnant, with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Health and Well-Being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work) SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) particularly off track.

At the country level, France and Croatia ranks in 5th and 8th position with an Index Score¹, respectively, of 82,7/100 and 82,2/100. Yet even these countries face significant challenges related to SDG 12, SDG 13 and SDG 15, particularly in response to environmental degradation and unsustainable resource use. On the other shore of the Mediterranean, Syria (60,6 score; 127th position), Lebanon (63,9 score; 110th position) and Egypt (69,1; 83rd position) occupies the last positions of the ranking. The Syrian conflict and the resulting refugee crisis have had spillover effects on neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon and Egypt overwhelming social systems and exacerbating vulnerabilities linked to SDG 1, SDG 2 and SDG3. In the end, **no Mediterranean country is on track to fully meet the SDGs by 2030.**

Of course, Covid-19 was an enormous shock to the regional economy and to progress on the SDGs. Between 2019 and 2024, development indicators across the Mediterranean region reveal clear divergences shaped by development conditions, political stability, conflict, and broader geopolitical shifts (Figure 2). There are several factors that can justify this slowdown. First, many of the objectives – such as green and digital transitions – necessarily require a wider time horizon, up to 2050. Second, despite the commitments made to increase financial means to achieve sustainability, low-income economies in the region faced chronic shortfalls in financing the needed reforms for the implementation of the SDGs.

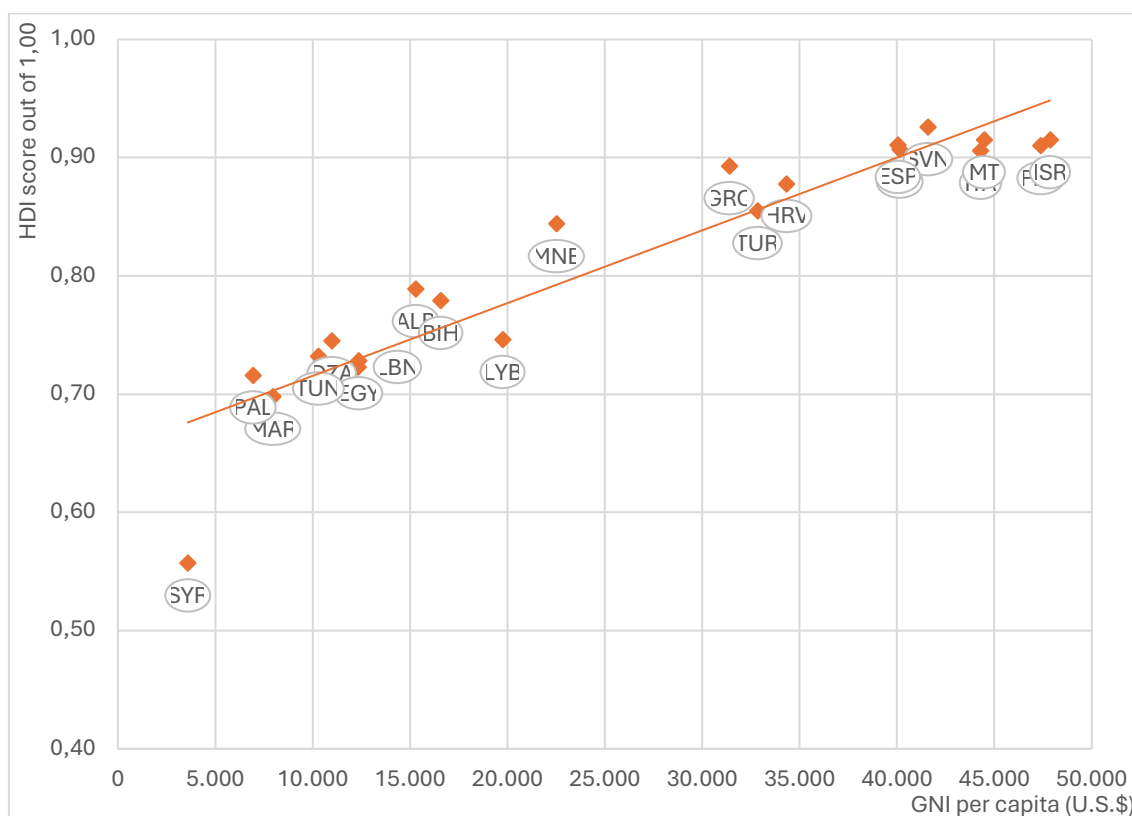
Third, international and regional crises – Ukraine war, political instability and conflicts in the Middle East and in the Sahel – both have directly impeded SDG progress. For example, countries such as Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, that in the aftermath of the Arab Springs witnessed temporary gains in governance indicators linked to SDG 16, have seen how political instability, economic crises, and authoritarian resurgence have eroded this early progress. Lebanon's economic collapse since 2019, intensified by the Beirut port explosion in 2020, has deepened multidimensional poverty and food insecurity. And, of course, those countries

¹ . Since 2016, the global edition of the SDR has provided the most up-to-date data to track and rank the performance of all UN Member States on the SDGs. The overall score measures the total progress towards achieving all 17 SDGs. The score can be interpreted as a percentage of SDG achievement. A score of 100 indicates that all SDGs have been achieved.

embroiled in protracted conflicts— Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine—have experienced severe regressions across multiple SDGs due to state fragility, humanitarian crises, and infrastructure collapse.

Finally, the initial support in favor of the 2030 Agenda has been steadily eroded. The national and global governance of the SDGs has been deeply undermined by social polarization, the deliberated disempowerment of civil society, and a nationalist turn that has jeopardized the multilateral cooperation in the region needed to achieve the SDGs. As a result, socio-economic disparities and institutional and governance conditions have diverged steadily over the past years in the region. (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – GNI per Capita vs. Human Development Index with Clusters in the Mediterranean



Source: the author. Data Human Development Report, 2024

Based on the 2024 HDI Index, a cluster analysis of Mediterranean countries reveals indeed four distinct groupings:

1. High Human Development Cluster (HDI \geq 0.90), characterized by high life expectancy (above 80 years), advanced education systems, and substantial GNI per capita— ranging from \$40,000 to nearly \$48,000.
2. Upper-Middle Human Development Cluster (HDI 0.80–0.89) with solid progress in life expectancy and education but still pending issues in areas such as gender inequality, female labor participation and income inequality

3. Medium Human Development Cluster (HDI 0.70–0.79) with moderate life expectancy (70-77 years), limited access to education (less than 10 schooling years), GNI per capita under \$20,000 and pronounced gender disparities.
4. Low Human Development Cluster (HDI \leq 0.70), where conflict and political instability have severely impacted human development.

Two implications follow. First, contrasting trajectories and uneven outcomes in the Mediterranean can contribute to widening the gap between clusters of countries that offer different opportunities and vital choices to their citizens, by reinforcing the tensions that already exist in the region. Second, although the 2030 Agenda states a series of common principles and goals, strategies to achieve the SDGs in the region must follow differential approaches. Basically, countries with low HDI need to find solutions to increase prosperity without increasing their environmental and social externalities. On the contrary, countries with a high HDI need to find solutions to maintain high HDI but decrease their environmental and social (negative) impacts.

Table 1 – SDG tracker for Mediterranean Countries

	SDG1: No Poverty	SDG2: No Hunger	SDG3: Good Health and Well-Being	SDG4: Quality Education	SDG5: Gender Equality	SDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation	SDG7: Affordable and Clean Energy	SDG8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	SDG9: Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	SDG10: Reduced Inequalities	SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	SDG12: Responsible Consumption & Production	SDG13: Climate Action	SDG14: Life Below Water	SDG15: Life on Land	SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals
ALB	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
DZA	●	↗	●	●	↗	↗	●	↗	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	●	●	↗
BIH	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
HRV	●	↗	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗
CYP	↗	●	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗
EGY	↗	●	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
FRA	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
GRC	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
ISR	↗	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
ITA	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
LBN	●	↗	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↘	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗
LYB	●	●	↘	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	●	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	●	↗
MT	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
MON	●	●	↗	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	↗
MNE	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
MAR	↗	↗	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↗	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗
POR	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
ESP	↗	●	↗	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
SYR	↗	●	↗	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↗	●	↗	↗	↘	↗
TUN	●	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
TUR	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗	↘	↗	↗	↗	↗

Dashboards: ● SDG achieved ● Challenges remain ● Significant challenges remain ● Major challenges remain ● Information unavailable

Trends: ↑ On track or maintaining SDG achievement ↗ Moderately improving → Stagnating ↓ Decreasing ● Trend information unavailable

Source: Sachs et al., 2024

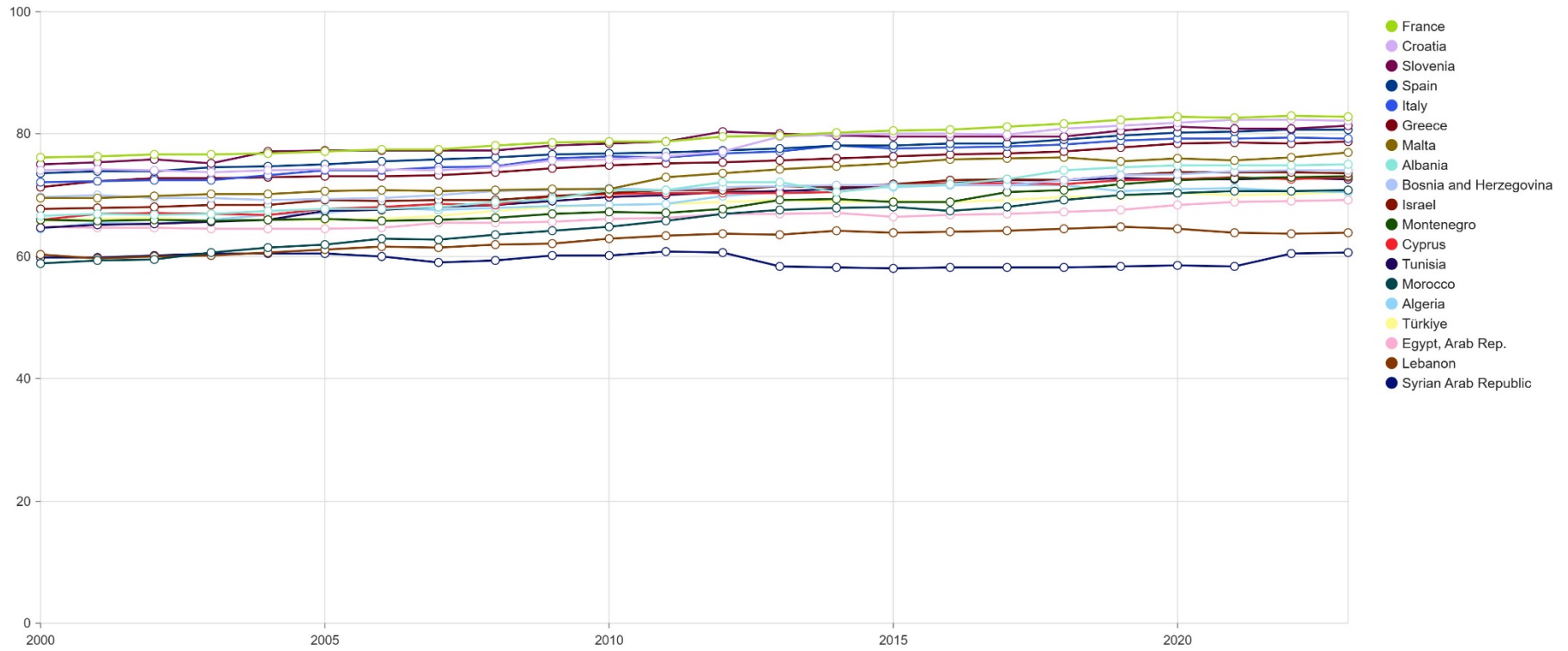
The Mediterranean region and the new international context.

Current trends and future challenges.

Figure 2 – SDG Overall score 2000 - 2023

Overall score

2000 – 2023



Source: SDR, 2024

The Mediterranean region and the new international context.
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3. Current trends and future challenges in the Mediterranean region

The 5 Principles framework

To assess the current trends and future challenges that will impact the Mediterranean region in the coming years, this report considers as the main starting point the foundational structure of the 2030 Agenda (Figure 3). Originally, the Agenda established five areas of critical importance, better known as the five pillars or the “5Ps”: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership (United Nation, 2015).

Figure 3 - Five “Ps” structure of Agenda 2030



Source: Delgado-Baena et al., 2024

With respect the traditional understanding of the Agenda – through its 17 SDGs – the 5P structure favors a systemic approach which allows to put into perspective the multiple dimensions of sustainable development and the synergies and the trade-offs between the goals². From a policy making perspective, classifying the SDGs across the “5Ps” enable to integrate systems thinking in the implementation stage. This is in line with policy coherence approach meant as the systematic promotion of synergies between and within different policy areas to achieve the outcomes associated with jointly agreed policy objectives (Nilsson et al., 2012; Nilsson et al., 2016; OECD, 2019, 2003).

² The holistic character of the Agenda and the identification of interactions between the various SDG targets is a challenge that has attracted the attention of the academic community as well as policymakers (Bennich et al., 2020; Weitz et al., 2023; Sachs et al., 2019; Villeneuve et al., 2017). Most studies alert the impossibility of drawing universal conclusions and reveal the variability of possible relationships between targets. At the same time, scholars confirm that a systemic understanding of the 2030 Agenda promotes a more integrated implementation of the SDGs across territories, sectors and stakeholders

By applying this systemic approach, this report highlights the importance of looking at the implementation of the Agenda 2030 in the Mediterranean region when seeking greater coherence between policies and sectors.

According to the framework:

1. **People** refers to the commitment to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.
(SDG 1 – No Poverty; SDG 2 – Zero Hunger; SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being; SDG 4 – Quality Education; SDG 5 – Gender Equality).
2. **Planet** signifies the challenge of protecting the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations
(SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy; SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production; SDG 13 – Climate Action; SDG 14 – Life Below Water)
3. **Prosperity** signifies to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature.
(SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG 9 - Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities; SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities)
4. **Peace** is to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.
(SDG 16 - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)
5. **Partnerships** indicate the commitment to mobilize the means required to implement this Agenda through a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people.
(SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals)

People

Under the “People principle”, the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the fundamental commitment to human dignity, social justice, and equity. Basically, this principle acknowledges that sustainable development cannot be achieved if large segments of the population remain excluded from the benefits of progress – i.e.: the leaving no one behind principle.

In the Mediterranean region, the People dimension of the 2030 Agenda is shaped by a complex interplay of demographic trends and migration dynamics, disparities among social groups, particularly gender inequality. A human-centered policy approach within this dimension requires therefore structural interventions that strengthen human capital and state-led services. Basically, for achieving the SDGs under the People principle, the most urgent reforms concern: enhancing universal access to quality education and lifelong learning; strengthening the coverage and the quality of national healthcare and social protection systems; managing adequately the flows of people; promoting gender equality and removing systemic barriers to women's and less-favored groups in the participation in political, economic, and social life.

Movements of people

As of 2023, the population in Mediterranean countries reached approximately 550 million with an overall growth of 44.2% between 1990 and 2023³. Influenced by diverse push-and-pull factors, three primary clusters emerge in the region. The first one comprises high-emigration countries, marked by significant outflows due to economic instability, conflict, or political unrest. This group includes Syria (-212,200), Lebanon (-115,100), where conflicts have precipitated humanitarian crises, contributing to mass displacement. The second cluster encompasses moderate-emigration countries experiencing steady but less dramatic population losses. Egypt (-32,400), Algeria (-18,800), Greece (-14,800), Albania (-10,600), Croatia (-10,400), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (-25,900) fall within this category. Emigration in these countries is driven by economic stagnation, youth unemployment, and political climate. Finally, the third cluster consists of immigration-receiving countries, such as Spain (275,000), Italy (28,000), France (20,600).

Migration is a complex issue that poses challenges to societies in both sending and receiving countries. As climate change, labor shortages, demographic pressures and conflicts continue, the Mediterranean region is likely to experience further migration. Politically unstable conditions in the Sahel region could further exacerbate migratory tensions, potentially transforming the Mediterranean into a pivotal nexus between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. The development of effective mechanisms that preserve people's freedom to move while minimizing negative impacts is therefore an imperative. Since 2020, the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine has resulted in millions of people, mostly women and children, fleeing their homes to seek safety abroad. As a result, in 2022, Europe overtook sub-Saharan Africa as the second largest region of destination of refugees and asylum seekers globally. Today, Northern Africa – together with Western Asia - continues to be home to the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers in the world. And, at the country level, Turkey is the largest destination of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide in 2023 (UNHCR, 2024).

³ The UN expects the MED area to reach a demographic plateau at around 650 million people by 2060 (United Nations, 2019).

Large-scale movements of people can be beneficial in many circumstances. Cross-border mobility of workers can produce significant economic benefits, if managed well. However, it can also be a source of serious disruption if it reduces job opportunities for local workers and/or increases public service and environmental pressures on urban agglomerations and local communities. Equally, economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers can increase tensions that can trigger xenophobia in the countries that are hosting them and can generate increased support for repressive migration regulations.

Since 2022, there has been an increase in the number of individuals crossing the Mediterranean Sea; however, this figure remains significantly below the record high of over a million people who arrived in Europe in 2015, primarily seeking refuge from conflict and violence. In fact, with an average of 120,000 individuals crossing the sea annually since 2016, the influx of irregular migrants reaching European shores could be considered relatively manageable. However, it is important to acknowledge the tragic loss of thousands of lives due to the deplorable conditions often perpetuated by organised crime networks that control illicit migration routes. Since 2014, a total of 31,383 migrants have perished while attempting to cross the Mediterranean, emphasising the urgent need for more effective and humane solutions to address the root causes of forced displacement⁴.

In the context of euro-mediterranean relations, the EU has continued to engage on migration with countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean. But, with respect to the incipient stages of the mid-1990s and the 'ring of friends' momentum of the early 2000, the EU has moved today from a value-based to an interest-based migration diplomacy (Fakhry, 2024). The main goal of EU migration policy remains to curb irregular migration to Europe, but the format has changed through a process of informalization that has weakened the role of EU parliament- just when in 2024 the euro camera definitively adopted the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum - and has privileged the usage of informal and ad hoc agreements with the countries of the region. The trend started with the 2016 EU- Turkey agreement and has continued since these last years. Between 2023 and 2024, the EU concluded migration deals worth more than 8,5 billion euro with Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon.

By the securitization approach, mainly focused on funding and outsourcing migration control to third countries, the EU has empowered partner countries to develop their own migration diplomacy. According to some authors - in a scenario where new actors are also playing in the region - short-term migrations strategies increase the risk of exacerbating dependencies and violations of human rights in the name of migration control (Cassarino et al., 2023; Tardis, 2024). More importantly, once the funds are disbursed, there is little EU officials can do to ensure that partner countries enforce of respect their commitment to better control their border or better protect migrants and refugees (Fakhry, 2024).

In this context, expected priorities and action-oriented policies in the context of movements of people should include;

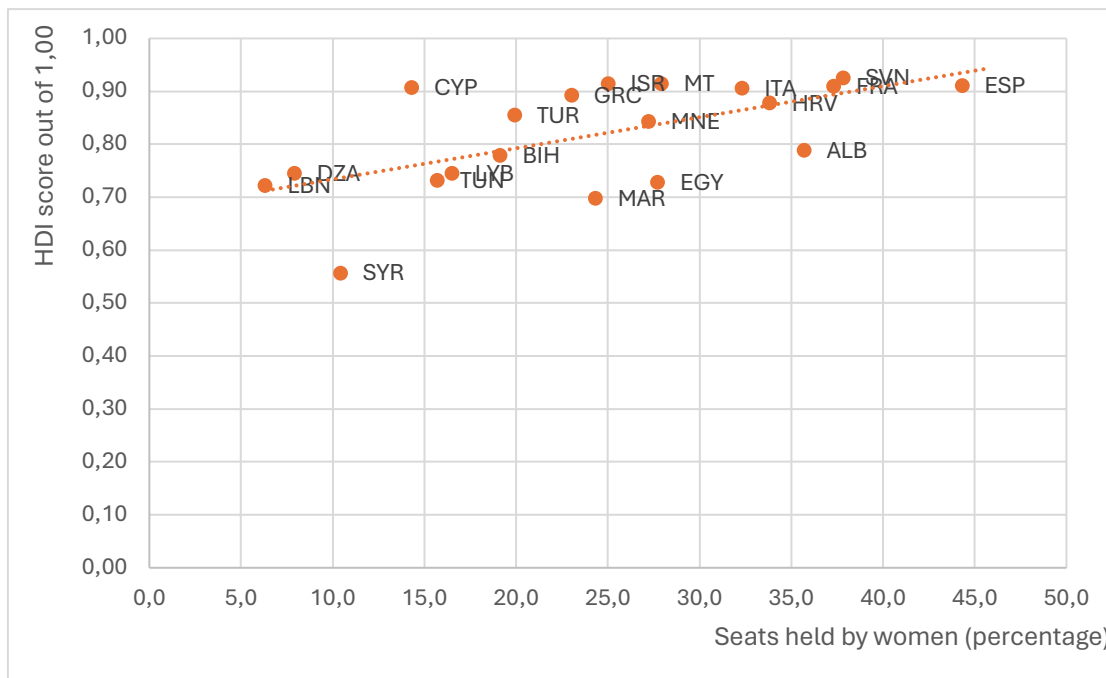
⁴ Data from Missing Migrants Project. <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

- **Strengthen migration regulation and human rights protection**
Advocate for migration policies that reinforce parliamentary oversight, transparency, and accountability. Ensure migration funds are conditional on human rights compliance. Support and advocate for multilateral efforts with international organizations for the respect of human rights.
- **Investing in people at home and in sending communities**
Develop structured labour mobility programs that address regional workforce shortages through vocational training and circular migration. Simultaneously, invest in community-based and civic society initiatives to foster economic and social inclusion, preventing xenophobia and social tensions.
- **Enhance multilateral cooperation and capacity building**
Strengthen regional partnerships in capacity building initiatives to reinforce operational, administrative and policy capacity for managing movements of people in sending territories.

Gender inequalities

The Mediterranean region presents a diverse and complex landscape for the achievement of SDG 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Gender parity in political representation, a critical indicator of SDG 5, reveals notable discrepancies across Mediterranean countries (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Seats held by women in national parliament vs HDI Index



Source: the author. Data from SDR, 2024 and HDI 2024.

While some countries have made significant strides, others continue to lag behind. As a result of legislative reforms - including proactive policies aimed at promoting female participation in decision-making - countries

such as Spain (44.3%) and France (37.3%) exhibit higher levels of female representation in national parliaments. In contrast, countries like Lebanon (6.3%), Algeria (7.9%), and Egypt (27.7%) show considerable room for improvement, with underrepresentation of women in political spaces remaining a significant barrier to gender equality (UN Women, 2023).

The variations in political representation across Mediterranean countries can be attributed to several factors, including cultural norms, economic conditions, and the strength of gender equality movements within each country. States, particularly in the southern and eastern parts, often face additional challenges, such as entrenched patriarchal values and political instability, which hinder the advancement of women in institutions. However, progress is evident in countries like Albania (35.7%), Croatia (33.8%), and Malta (27.9%). This progress highlights the importance of political will, societal change, and international cooperation in achieving SDG 5 across the Mediterranean basin.

In addition to the representation of women in politics, the broader situation of women and the LGBTQI+ collective in the Mediterranean region reveals both progress and deep-rooted challenges. While gender equality policies have advanced in some Mediterranean countries, women continue to face significant barriers, including gender-based violence, limited access to economic opportunities, and unequal representation in leadership roles across various sectors. For women, economic empowerment remains a central challenge, particularly in North African and Middle Eastern countries, where labor force participation is often restricted by societal norms and legal frameworks. Furthermore, gender-based violence remains pervasive across the region, with laws protecting women from domestic violence varying widely and often inadequately enforced (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The situation for the LGBTQIA+ collective is even more complex. In many countries, such as Lebanon and Tunisia, LGBTQI+ individuals experience some degree of social acceptance, but in others, like Egypt, Morocco, and Syria, sexual orientation remains criminalized and subject to harsh legal penalties. In the last couple of years, the entire region has faced significant political shifts that have stalled progress towards gender equality and, in many cases, reinforced inequalities (Euromed Rights, 2024). State-led reaffirmations of conservative norms and religious ideologies have targeted feminist movements and LGBTQIA+ communities, with governments increasing their censorship power⁵.

Both shores of the Mediterranean have witnessed attacks on women and LGBTQIA+ individuals' rights and safety. Nevertheless, the instruments and the consequences of these attacks vary according to the characteristics of the country. Usually, in high HDI countries such backlashes often manifest through restrictive institutional changes and legislative shifts. In contrast, in low HDI countries they are often intertwined in developmental challenges, wars and conflicts, which can make the gendered nature of these attacks more complex to identify, as women's rights are often linked to broader economic justice and basic rights struggles.

⁵ https://backlashmap.euromedrights.org/en/?_gl=1*ukhcs6*_ga*MzAyNzk3MjU2LjE3NDAzMzY2Mic.*_ga_5H0QS9NZSJ*MTc0MDc3NTcwMS40LjEuMTc0MDc3NjMxOS41My4wLjA.

In this context, expected priorities and action-oriented policies in the context of gender equality should include;

- **Promote Gender Equality in multilateral cooperation framework**
Support multilateral Mediterranean regional programs and initiative for the promotion of human rights, gender equality and no discrimination. Defend EU-backed monitoring of gender rights violations and protection against repression and censorship.

- **Advocacy and awareness raising and counter Regressive Policies initiatives**
Advocate against and raise awareness of gendered violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors in conflict zones; Advocate against media censorship and control of socio-cultural and educational content that undermines gender equality. Mobilize key political, media, and civil society actors to collectively challenge backlash movements and apply targeted pressure on responsible social actors.

- **Enhancing civil society organizations**
Develop platforms and safe spaces for human rights activists to share their experiences. Amplify their voices internationally, ensuring they receive visibility and support. Collaborate with Mediterranean partners (governments, public administrations, civil society associations, etc..) to reinforce regulations against gender-based violence.

Planet

The Planet principle of the 2030 Agenda highlights the urgent need to safeguard Earth's ecosystems and natural resources for present and future generations. This principle recognizes the interdependence between human action and the planet. And it basically warns that crossing planet boundaries – the nine ecological limits within which humanity can safely operate - will increase the risk of destabilizing Earth's systems, threatening long-term sustainability.

The Mediterranean region faces significant environmental challenges, with several planetary boundaries being already approached or surpassed, impacting the implementation of the SDGs. A sustainability-focused policy approach under the Planet principle concerns structural reforms in the field of: a) fighting and adapting to climate change through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the promotion of renewable energy sources; b) a sustainable management of natural resources, in particular water and land with the objective of preserving biodiversity and ecosystems; c) a switch towards circular economies that minimize waste and promote responsible production and consumption patterns

Climate change

Climate change is one of the most critical challenges in the region. The Mediterranean Basin is indeed recognized as a climate change hotspot, warming 20% faster than the global average (IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, 2023). The region's average temperature has already risen by more than 1.5°C compared to the industrial period. It is expected to rise by a further 2.3°C to 3.6°C by mid-century under high-emissions scenarios and could exceed 5.5°C by the end of the century, leading to, among other things, severe health impacts (MedECC, 2024). It is estimated that sea level rise — which could be close to one meter compared to its 20th century level — coupled with water scarcity, recurrent droughts and high temperatures, could result in the displacement of more than 20 million people.

Extreme climate events have become more frequent. Shortly after catastrophic floods devastated regions in the Valencian Community and Castilla-La Mancha, the dangers of anthropogenic climate change in this area are becoming increasingly clear. In the last two years, for example, the effect of the pronounced rain deficit, combined with the record-high temperatures, were observed along the Mediterranean coast in Spain, Italy, Greece, and the Mediterranean islands. In 2024, in Cataluña the local authorities already declared a drought emergency, with strict water restrictions. Also in Portugal, specifically in the Algarve, the government ordered water use restrictions, mainly for irrigation of gardens and urban environment (European JRC, 2024).

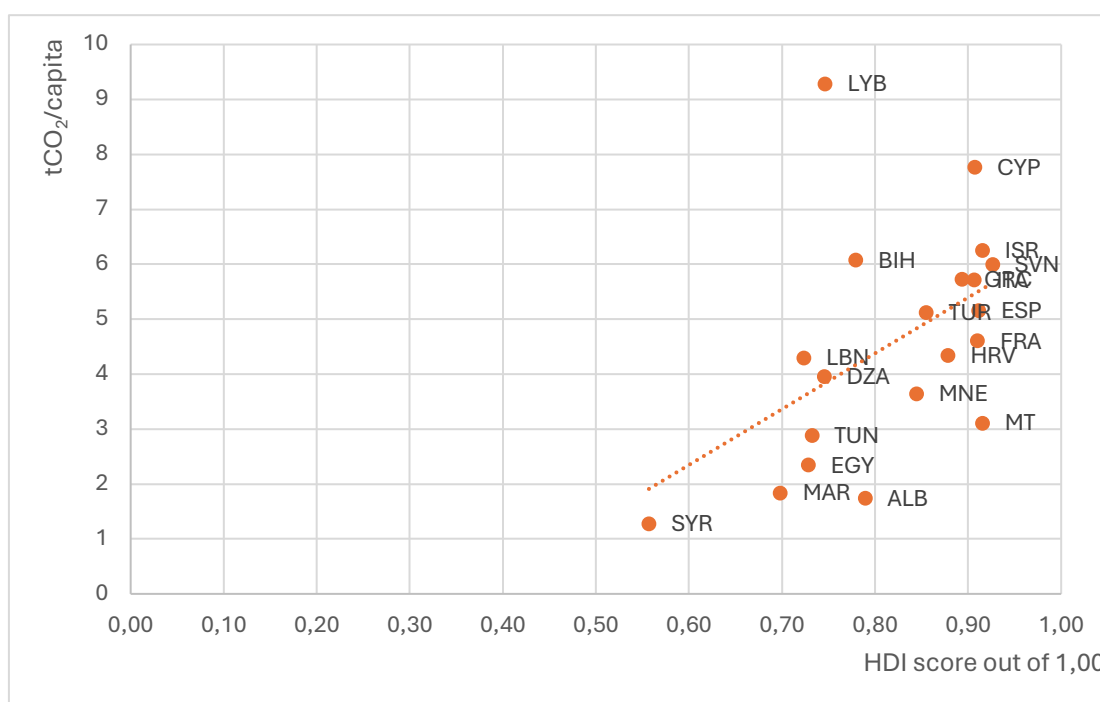
In Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, prolonged droughts have severely impacted agricultural productivity, leading to significant reductions in crop yields, lower biomass accumulation, and declining soil moisture levels. Water scarcity has intensified, limiting irrigation capacity and exacerbating land degradation, particularly in semi-arid and arid regions. Moreover, farmers face economic strain due to lower agricultural outputs and rising input costs, further challenging the resilience of the agricultural sector.

From a policy-making perspective, it is relevant to notice that most vulnerable groups in society - such as the elderly, migrants, refugees, internally displaced individuals, women, children and low-income earners -

are highly exposed to climate hazards. In several cases – especially in low HDI countries – these groups are not adequately engaged in the policy-making processes nor adequately considered in policy measures, to ensure efficient and just transition to changing environment and climate.

In terms of CO₂ emissions – among the main driver of climate change - the current share of carbon emissions of the Mediterranean countries amounts to no more than 6 percent of global emissions, with northern Mediterranean countries contributing the largest proportion. Progress in decarbonization across the region is uneven and mainly shaped by economic structures, energy policies and geopolitical constraints, with implications for climate governance.

Figure 5 – CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production (tCO₂/capita, 2022) vs HDI Index



Source: the author. Data from SDR, 2024 and HDI 2024.

While greenhouse gas emissions in northern Mediterranean countries have been systematically decreasing, they have been continuously increasing in southern and eastern Mediterranean countries mainly driven by economic and population growth and do not show a promising path in their reduction given the expected increase in energy demand in the next few decades. While countries like Spain (7.63 tCO₂ in 2000 to 5.16 in 2022) and France (6.95 to 4.61) demonstrate sustained reductions, reflecting energy transitions, deindustrialization, and renewable energy policies, in North Africa, Algeria (2.79 to 3.96) and Morocco (1.17 to 1.84) exhibit moderate but steady increases, driven by industrial growth and fossil fuel dependency. Egypt's emissions remain stable (~2.0–2.5), suggesting limited decarbonization.

Sustainable consumption and production

In the Mediterranean, current consumption and production patterns are unsustainable and result in substantial environmental costs, including land take and degradation, water scarcity, noise, water and air pollution, biodiversity loss (UNEP/MAP and Plan Bleu 2020). The ecological deficit in the Mediterranean countries is twice as high as the global average, meaning that Mediterranean countries consume approximately 2.5 times more natural resources and ecological services than the region's ecosystems can provide (Akcali et al. 2022). Over the past 15 years, the ecological footprint⁶ has been mainly on the rise in southern and eastern Mediterranean countries (except for Syrian Arab Republic and Libya, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro); and declining in the EU Mediterranean countries, most notably in Cyprus, Spain, Italy and Greece, as well as in Israel (UNEP, Med 2023).

Crucial socioeconomic sectors, such as tourism, ports and maritime transport, construction and real estate, contribute to economic development and employment, but are largely based on extractive models, insufficiently embracing circularity and sustainable development practices. While tourism had a strong positive economic impact across the region and has emerged as a pillar of many national economies in the Mediterranean - 13% of exports and 23% of the service sector - the benefits associated with tourism came at significant environmental and social costs. Fluctuations in the number of tourist arrivals come with a direct impact on the environment due to resource consumption and generation of externalities.

The Mediterranean is the world's leading tourism area, accounting for 35% of all international tourist arrivals and 30% of global tourism receipts. The dominant Mediterranean mass tourism model has picked up speed again and continues to concentrate in coastal areas. The overall number of international tourists (ITAs) arrivals in Mediterranean countries reached more than 400 million at the beginning of 2020, with an average annual increase of 13.7 million ITAs since 2010. Despite the collapse due to Covid-19 pandemic, with the gradual reopening of borders, travelers have returned to the region and since 2022, there has been an 11.7% growth in European Mediterranean destinations. However, armed conflicts in the region, security concerns as well as political instability along with deteriorating social and economic conditions have slightly modified the geography of tourism in the region. While tourism in the established North West Mediterranean destinations (primarily France, Spain and Italy) remained predominant - and new destinations from the South East and North East (in particular Turkey, but also Albania, Croatia and Montenegro) have gained momentum - the Middle East and North Africa recorded a decline of 20.8%.

For historical, social and political reasons, half of the tourism in the Mediterranean is mainly coastal tourism, mainly characterized by wasteful and overconsumption practices. Indeed, coastal areas accounted for a very high share of the total nights spent in tourist accommodation in Malta (100%), Cyprus (97%), Greece (96%), Spain (96%), and Croatia (93%) (EU 2022). The main pressures of the tourism sector on the marine environment are marine litter, coastal land take, habitat degradation, air emissions, water consumption and sewage generation, and proximity to natural sensitive areas (UNEP/ MAP and Plan Bleu 2020). Unless this model is profoundly changed into a 'blue sustainable model', the coastal and marine environment is likely to continue to be adversely affected by tourism in the years to come. Coastal adaptation management and

⁶ The Ecological Footprint measures how fast we consume resources and generate waste compared to how fast nature can absorb our waste and generate resources

planning processes provide unique opportunities for the establishment of permanent frameworks for science-policy-community interaction. Such frameworks require, however, political commitment, sufficient financial resources, evidence-based policy solution and stakeholder engagement. In many countries of the region, poor institutional and administrative capacity, together with divergent economic interests, can slow the pace of the reforms needed to modify tourist consumption habits and tourism business practices (Hazbum, 2024).

Green transition

The Mediterranean region remains heavily reliant on fossil fuels, with 65% of the energy mix in Northern Mediterranean states and 92% in the South (MedECC, 2020). This dependence contrasts with the region's vast untapped potential for renewable energy, particularly solar and wind power. However, the transition towards renewables is uneven, with significant disparities between Northern and Southern Mediterranean countries.

Hydropower is currently the dominant renewable energy source in the region, valued for its efficiency and adaptability to energy demand. However, its expansion is constrained by limited hydrological resources, and climate change-induced alterations in rainfall patterns could further impact its reliability. Wind power, primarily deployed onshore, faces spatial limitations due to the large areas required for installation. Nevertheless, the declining costs of wind turbines improve its economic feasibility. Solar energy holds immense potential, especially in North Africa, yet remains underutilized. Only 2.7% of the total regional solar capacity is currently exploited. Challenges include the efficiency losses experienced at high temperatures—typically above 35°C—and exposure to dust storms, which can reduce photovoltaic performance (OME, 2021). However, the declining cost of solar panels is improving accessibility, creating opportunities for large-scale solar farms. If just 1% of North African land were dedicated to solar electricity production, the estimated installable capacity would be 2,800 GW—compared to the current 85 GW installed across the Mediterranean (IEA, 2023).

Despite these opportunities, renewable energy deployment remains highly uneven across the Mediterranean. In 2021, the share of renewables in total energy consumption was less than 5% in North Africa, compared to 22% in the EU, and under 1% in the Middle East. However, investments have accelerated, particularly in power generation, where renewables accounted for 43% (686 GW) of total capacity in 2020, mostly in Northern Mediterranean countries. In the South and East Mediterranean, renewable capacity nearly tripled between 2005 and 2020. Solar energy demand surged from 0.54 Mtoe in 1990 to 13.11 Mtoe in 2020, while wind energy grew from non-existence in 1990 to 16.36 Mtoe in 2020 (OME, 2021). Morocco has emerged as a leader in solar energy with projects like the Noor Solar Complex, while Egypt is rapidly expanding its wind power capacity. Cross-border energy partnerships, such as those under the Mediterranean Solar Plan, can enhance regional energy security and promote the green transition.

The EU is taking steps to foster a regional energy transition, with initiatives such as the “Fit for 55” package and the Green Partnership Deal signed with Morocco in 2022. However, translating policy into action remains challenging. Expanding renewable energy requires careful site selection, considering climate suitability,

infrastructure availability, and cost-effectiveness. Additionally, increasing the share of renewables introduces energy system vulnerabilities, such as climate variability impacts on wind and solar generation.

The energy transition is not just a technological challenge but also a socio-economic transformation. Principles of fairness and justice must underpin this shift to ensure an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens. Addressing land degradation, improving soil and water resource management, and integrating digital solutions are essential components of a sustainable transition. Additionally, investment in renewable energy infrastructure must align with broader economic and social development goals.

North Africa has significant potential to become a global clean technology hub. By 2050, the region could supply 5% of European battery demand and nearly 20% of cathode demand, supporting local economies while strengthening EU energy security (IEA, 2023). At COP28, the Dubai Consensus set a goal of tripling global renewable energy capacity, which would require 1 TW of installed capacity in the Mediterranean by 2030. Achieving this milestone could enhance regional stability and position the Mediterranean as a leader in climate action.

Financing remains a key challenge. An estimated \$120 billion in annual investments is needed to support the Mediterranean's green transition, potentially generating around 3 million new jobs across the solar and wind supply chains. However, unlocking this funding requires a cohesive financial strategy that combines government policy commitments, robust governance frameworks, and incentives for private investment. The role of National and Regional Development Banks, Multilateral Development Banks will be critical in mobilizing financial resources. Mechanisms such as public-private partnerships, concessional loans, and risk mitigation tools must be leveraged to attract long-term private capital.

Ultimately, a successful transition to renewable energy in the Mediterranean hinges on strong collaboration between the public and private sectors. Governments must take the lead in de-risking investments, while private capital is essential for scaling up deployment. A well-structured financial ecosystem, aligned with the Paris Agreement, will be crucial to meeting decarbonization goals. By fostering regional cooperation and aligning financial incentives, the Mediterranean can secure a sustainable and resilient energy future.

Prosperity

The Prosperity principle of the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need to ensure inclusive and sustainable economic growth, technological advancement, and equitable access to resources. It seeks to foster conditions where all individuals can thrive economically, while also addressing systemic inequalities and promoting environmental responsibility.

In the Mediterranean region, prosperity is shaped by distinct socio-economic dynamics, structural inequalities but also strong potentials. Inclusive economic growth is hindered by low rates of labor participation – especially for women - and challenged by new technological opportunities. Youth unemployment is a structural problem in several areas of the region and decent work opportunities remain unevenly distributed across the region. Digital transformation is an increasingly vital driver of prosperity, but it requires infrastructure investments and coordinated actions that can foster innovation while ensuring social inclusion and environmental sustainability. Finally, urbanization trends have posed dramatic challenges to cities in the provision of public services such as waste management, transportation, and affordable housing.

In summary, fostering prosperity in the Mediterranean requires targeted interventions to tackle youth and female unemployment, enhance digital infrastructure, and develop sustainable urban environments. Addressing these interconnected priorities will be essential for achieving equitable economic growth and fostering regional cohesion by 2030.

Inclusive economic growth

Trade, investments, innovation and industrial policies are at the heart of economic development. In the Mediterranean region – particularly in the Southern countries - despite the many reforms adopted over the past years, structural transformation remains slow and the impact of these policies on job creation remains low, especially for women and youth.

Entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, green, blue and circular economies can encourage job creation and economic dynamism. Start-up accelerators, innovation hubs, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can play crucial roles in driving economic prosperity. In the region, indeed, 80% of the jobs are created by SMEs. Nevertheless, structural barriers such lack of skills and training, limited labor market participation for marginalized populations, remain key challenges. Moreover, while technological innovation and the spread of artificial intelligence can create new job sectors, automation threatens traditional industries, necessitating re-skilling and labor market adaptation. Finally, informal employment is prevalent in many Southern Mediterranean countries, limiting social protection and job security.

Differentials in access to education (especially for girls) and educational attainments across the region partly explain the disparities in the labour markets across the region. While some countries demonstrate high lower secondary completion rates, others - notably Syria (43.2%) and Morocco (72.3%) - lag behind. These discrepancies are significant when analyzing youth unemployment trends. Higher educational completion rates often correlate with lower unemployment, where robust education systems coincide with better labor

market outcomes. Conversely, countries with lower educational completion rates frequently experience higher youth unemployment, exacerbated by structural economic challenges and political instability.

With over 60 million young people aged 15-29, the region's youth demographic constitutes a significant portion of its population. It is expected that, by 2050, more than 300 million young people will be entering the job market in North African countries. One of the foremost concerns is the quality and accessibility to work. Youth unemployment rates remain a pressing issue in the region, averaging around 25%, nearly double the global average. Economic downturns, structural challenges, and a lack of job opportunities have led to a sense of frustration and disillusionment among young people.

Particularly, North African countries present youth unemployment rates that often surpass 30%. In 2023⁷, for example, youth unemployment reached 32% in Algeria, 32,7% in Morocco, 38% in Tunisia and 24,7% in Egypt. Although with better figures, Southern European countries - such as Greece (26,6%), Spain (26,5%) and Italy (18%) - also experience elevated youth unemployment rates.

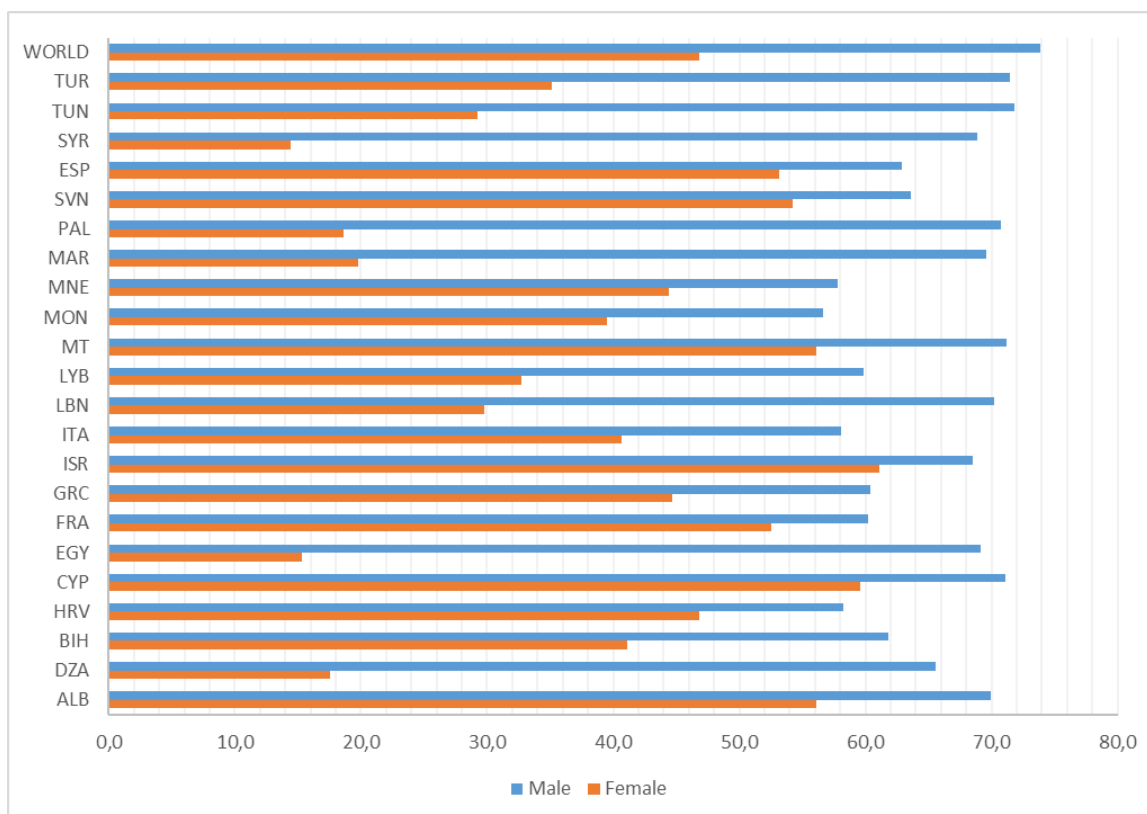
Addressing this issue requires strengthening vocational training, promoting entrepreneurship, and aligning educational systems with labor market demands, particularly in high-growth sectors like technology and renewable energy. Efforts to address these challenges are ongoing. Youth-led initiatives are gaining traction, driven by social media platforms where 75% of young people are active users. These platforms serve as vehicles for expression, advocacy, and mobilization, harnessing the energy of Mediterranean youth to shape their own futures and contribute to the region's development. Initiatives such as the Union for the Mediterranean's (UfM) Regional Agenda for Inclusive Growth aim to address these disparities by supporting labor market reforms and fostering inclusive economic growth, contributing to overall stability and growth.

Inclusive economic growth is contingent upon the participation of women in economic life and job markets. In the Middle East and North Africa, the gender gap stands at 62.6%, in comparison to Europe's 76.3% and the global average of 68.4%. With regard to gender disparities, in almost all countries, female participation in the labour force is lower than that of men (Figure 6). The disparities are particularly pronounced in Algeria, Egypt and Morocco, Syria and Turkey. Conversely, southern European countries demonstrate moderate gender gaps, indicating higher female workforce integration.

Within the Mediterranean region, the status of women is intricately woven into a tapestry of social, cultural, and economic dynamics. Notably progress has been made in some economies towards women's economic inclusion. For example, in 1990, tertiary education enrollment data showed 12.8% of women and 14.4% of men enrolled in university, while in 2022 it was 43.4% of women and 37.4% of men. Even though women have advanced in education, differences persist in the fields of study, with notable gender segregation in areas such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

⁷ Figures from WB and ILO, 2024

Figure 6 – Labour force participation rate (% ages 15 and older)



Source: the author. Data from SDR, 2024 and HDI 2024.

Nevertheless, despite receiving more education than men, women still suffer structural inequalities in the labour market (Mateos, 2024). These include limited access to education and training, workplace bias, disproportionate burdens in unpaid domestic and roles, barriers to accessing financial services and entrepreneurial support. Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands a comprehensive approach that not only encompasses economic measures but also confronts the social, cultural, and political barriers perpetuating gender inequality. In this regard, women’s economic empowerment is a key driver for gender equality, economic growth, and social inclusion in the Mediterranean region and beyond.

Infrastructure development

The Mediterranean region’s strategic location between three continents represents a significant competitive advantage, positioning it as a potential international hub, with the capacity to influence global value chains (UfM, 2024). These potential benefits the region by attracting investment, stimulating employment and industrial growth. For instance, the Southern Mediterranean countries currently account for only 24% of all FDIs, suggesting significant untapped potential for investments. Furthermore, the region’s economic integration could be enhanced. Trade flow distribution in the Euro-Mediterranean region reveals that 90% of trade takes place within the EU, with only 1% occurring among Southern Mediterranean neighbors (ILO, 2022). Intra-Mediterranean trade represents just a third of overall trade between the Mediterranean and the rest of the world, in contrast to other prosperous regions where regionalization processes have gone deeper.

The external trade of the Mediterranean countries accounts for almost 45% of GDP, although a third of this is energy related. The 10 countries of the South and East are the second largest trading partners of the EU, but receive only 12% of EU exports. Exports are predominantly sourced from a select group of five countries: Italy, Germany, France, Great Britain, and Spain.

Focusing on infrastructure development – from transport and energy to water and digital services - remains crucial for enhancing trade, connectivity, and regional integration. The expansion of trans-Mediterranean transportation networks, including modernized ports and rail corridors, strengthens economic ties and facilitates cross-border cooperation and open trade. This potential, however, remains largely untapped, constrained by a variety of systemic challenges such as poor regional integration, inadequate connectivity, a fragmented regulatory framework and, more recently, a complex geopolitical scenario (Lauria, 2024). Traditionally, infrastructure spending has averaged only around 3% of GDP, mainly funded through public sector resources and/or complemented by multilateral and bilateral debt financing. Difficulted by post-Covid-19 recovery, governments of the region own constrained financial capacities, far from the approximately 106 billion dollars annually required for infrastructure modernization (OECD, 2021).

In the end, the Middle East and North Africa are among the least integrated regions in the world. Despite evident trade ties – mainly in oil and gas export – physical connectivity remains underdeveloped. Poor land and sea transportation networks, along with a lack of digital infrastructure, restrict global market access and hinder intraregional trade in goods and services. Notably, only 5% of cargo traffic in the region is between these countries, compared to 70% between European ports and 15% between Europe and North Africa. Poor infrastructure connectivity is exacerbated by governance challenges such as ineffective public administrations, institutional capacities at the sub-national level, high degrees of corruption, uncertainty and weak compliance with rule of law and international standards.

Regarding FDI, for example, several countries in the region exhibit regulatory constraints for third-country investors such as accession restrictions in some strategic sectors, limited foreign ownership and mandatory joint-ventures, with foreign capital cap at 49%. Geopolitical tensions and security concerns have further impacted on the region's economic landscape. The Covid-19, the Ukraine conflict and the Israel-Hamas war have contributed to feed the debate on reshoring versus nearshoring to counter face the possible shortage in the global value chains. Greater instability has also escalated shipping costs because of the obstacles in some fundamental trade route, like for example the Red Sea.

Digital connectivity is equally important and requires substantial investments and financial support. Over the past 15 years, the Mediterranean region has seen a rapid spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs), with, for example, the total number of mobile cellular telephone subscriptions doubling between 2005 and 2021 to exceed 580 million. The share of the population using the internet has increased by several folds in a few countries, most notably in Albania and Algeria, but also in Lebanon, Tunisia, Syrian Arab Republic, Egypt, Morocco and Turkey. Affordable internet and broadband infrastructures are an evident priority, together with technological innovation for the development of smart logistics, blockchain and open digital platforms. This can help in setting up comprehensive logistics hubs, thus increasing efficiency and promoting value chain integration. The digital transition seemed to be slower and mainly focused on urban areas in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Syrian Arab Republic (UNEP/ MAP and Plan Bleu 2020).

Connectivity and infrastructure development have occurred with better results in the energy sector, as the development of several regional interconnection projects shows. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are working together on the Maghreb regional interconnection project, which will encourage energy trade with other countries in the region, such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority.

Enhancing the modernization of physical and digital infrastructure has also become a priority in the context of multilateral cooperation provided in the framework of the Euro-mediterranean relations. Initiatives like the EU's Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans and investments in undersea cable infrastructure connecting North Africa with Europe aim to bridge these gaps and foster regional economic integration. Through Team Europe, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the EU Global Gateway initiative focuses on creating sustainable energy, transport, digital and other critical infrastructure in emerging economies. With the double goal of promoting the green transition and to offer an alternative to China's global reach through the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Gateway has already mobilized 24 billion dollars of investment in the Southern Mediterranean region. Flagship projects include the development of a more than 7.000 km submarine optical fiber cable (Medusa project) to connect Northern African countries to the EU. A second project, the GREGY project, will build and electric interconnection between mainland Greece and Egypt for moving green energy from Egypt to Greece and the rest of the EU.

Urban agglomerations

Urbanization presents significant challenges and opportunities for sustainable development (UN HABITAT, 2023). As cities grow, ensuring access to affordable housing, efficient public transportation, and green spaces become essential for promoting inclusive urban prosperity. The variants of sustainable urban growth (smart cities, green cities, resilient cities, low carbon cities, sustainable cities, wise cities, etc.) have brought renewed opportunities to create pathways for sustainable urban development. While smart city initiatives and investments in sustainable infrastructure can enhance urban resilience, reduce pollution, and improve quality of life, special attention must be given to vulnerable urban populations, ensuring that rapid urban growth does not exacerbate social inequalities or environmental degradation.

The Mediterranean region is one of the most densely populated areas globally, characterized by urban agglomerations predominantly clustered along the coastlines.

UN projections foretell an urban population surge, estimating that by 2050, the urban population along the northern shore of the Mediterranean will grow to around 170 million and 300 million or more along the southern and eastern fringes (UNEP/MAP, 2016). Rapid urbanization process in cities like Cairo, Istanbul, and Casablanca have become unsustainable and demand urgent investments in infrastructure and urban planning. Despite the relatively lower growth rates in the European Mediterranean compared to the south and east parts of the region, urban sprawl along coastal fringe has surged, exacerbating vulnerability in these regions as well. European cities like Barcelona, Marseille, Rome, Istanbul or Athens are advancing sustainability through smart city paradigm, but pressures from international dynamics have provoked urgent challenges such as waste management, green spaces, transport congestion and affordable housing.

Additionally, the people living in cities of the Mediterranean region face sharp vulnerability to climate change due to a series of interconnected factors. These include heat waves, increasing risk of floods in densely populated coastal areas due to rising sea levels and intensified storm surges; more frequent droughts which exacerbate water shortages, a rise in severe forest fires encroaching into urban areas (Nastos and Saaroni, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a holistic perspective -in some cases beyond the municipal scale by including the metropolitan perspective - integrating climate adaptation and mitigation strategies into urban planning, infrastructure development, public health initiatives, and social equity policies. Such strategies rely upon improved coordination between different levels of government and different public and private stakeholders to optimize land use, plan multimodal transport systems to reduce car use, and promote green and blue infrastructure.

The EU, for example, encourages its member states, regions, and local governments to develop climate change adaptation action plans as part of its broader efforts to address climate change impacts. Action plans are strategic documents outlining specific actions and measures aimed at reducing vulnerability, enhancing resilience, and adapting to the changing climate conditions with a long-term vision and through multilevel governance with public and private stakeholders. Usually, they contemplate nature-based solutions aimed at redesigning the built environment through the lens of blue and green infrastructure. At the same time, they stimulate citizen awareness and engagement to co-produce climate adaptive solutions and ensure multi-level and multi-stakeholder coordination. Some interesting and recent experiences include⁸: the reconstruction of dunes on the metropolitan coast of Barcelona, the use of water and nature to reduce the heatwave effect in Rome, the improvement of coastal resilience in the Turkish city of Mersin (Medcities, 2024).

Nevertheless, the different levels of economic development across the Mediterranean cities imply, in general, different levels of commitment to support, invest in and promote sustainability across the cities of the region. This last aspect is likely to constraints sustainable solutions according to the material and political endowments of each specific urban context. Strengthening cooperation between local, regional, and national authorities is crucial to ensure the smooth implementation of climate adaptation initiatives. However, enabling contexts for the creation of effective multilevel and multistakeholder policies vary across the two shores of the Mediterranean.

At the same time, securing financial resources for urban green transition can be a serious obstacle for smaller and less rich cities. Without robust financial mechanisms – some of which can come from a mix of international grants, EU funds, and private investments - speeding up urgent climate solutions and ensuring projects' viability became a serious obstacle. City-to-city horizontal cooperation can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and good practices with less favored urban context. This collaborative approach is essential for enhancing resilience and fostering urban sustainable development in the face of climate change impacts. By building on lessons learned from other urban contexts, Mediterranean cities can be drivers in climate resilience and set models that can easily be replicated for other regions facing similar climate challenges.

⁸ <https://medcities.org/ca/experts-from-mediterranean-cities-share-threats-and-solutions-to-adapt-to-the-climate-crisis-in-barcelona/>

Scaling Nature-Based Solutions: Policymakers should prioritise implementing green and blue infrastructure projects to enhance the urban built environment. Cities should integrate these solutions into holistic, systemic, and long-term urban planning, focusing on co-benefits like biodiversity conservation, air quality, urban cooling, and coastal protection. 3.

Sustainable built environment: Metropolises must integrate climate-resilient designs and materials into urban development to reduce emissions and improve energy efficiency.

Promoting Sustainable Mobility: cities should invest in promoting smart and proactive mobility systems and expanding infrastructure for electric vehicles, cycling, and public transport to reduce dependence on private cars. Strategies like free public transport must be supported by thorough financial planning to ensure sustainability in maintenance and equitable access.

Encouraging Public Engagement: Engaging citizens in the planning and implementation phases of climate projects fosters ownership and ensures the success of adaptation strategies. Public information, awareness, and co-productive campaigns from participatory processes should be prioritised to address social resistance to change.

Peace, Justice and strong Institutions

SDG 16 focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development by providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. A growing body of evidence, often categorized under the “SDG 16+ agenda”⁹, demonstrates that SDG 16 is vital for the achievement of all other SDGs. Indeed, key principles of democratic governance - such as rights, participation, representation and the rule of law - are critical enablers across various SDGs, demonstrating robust interlinkages, particularly with SDG 1, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 5 and SDG 10. Without concerted efforts to reverse declines in democracy and the rule of law and reduce the number of conflict-related deaths, attempts to achieve other SDGs will suffer (UNDP, UNODC, and OHCHR, 2024).

As in the rest of the world, in the Mediterranean region democracy has been in decline, the rule of law has weakened, civic space has been shrinking, and conflicts have increased in number and intensity¹⁰. Wars and armed conflicts are having strong destabilizing effects in the region. On a global scale, in 2023, civilian casualties in armed conflicts increased by 72 per cent, the steepest rise since 2015. 7 out of 10 recorded civilian deaths occurred in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory in 2023. The conflict in Ukraine has also streamed its impacts on the region, directly on the populations of the Eastern Mediterranean and more indirectly – through imported inflation and shortages in the supply chains – in the rest of the Mediterranean. Of course, without peace there is no room for human-oriented policies, and this partly explains a lack of progress on SDG 16 and an urgency to accelerate action towards its achievement. In this sense, the conflict between Israel and Hamas - for its atrocity and violence against civilians and for the spillovers all over the region – has the potential to have a very disruptive impact on the entire region.

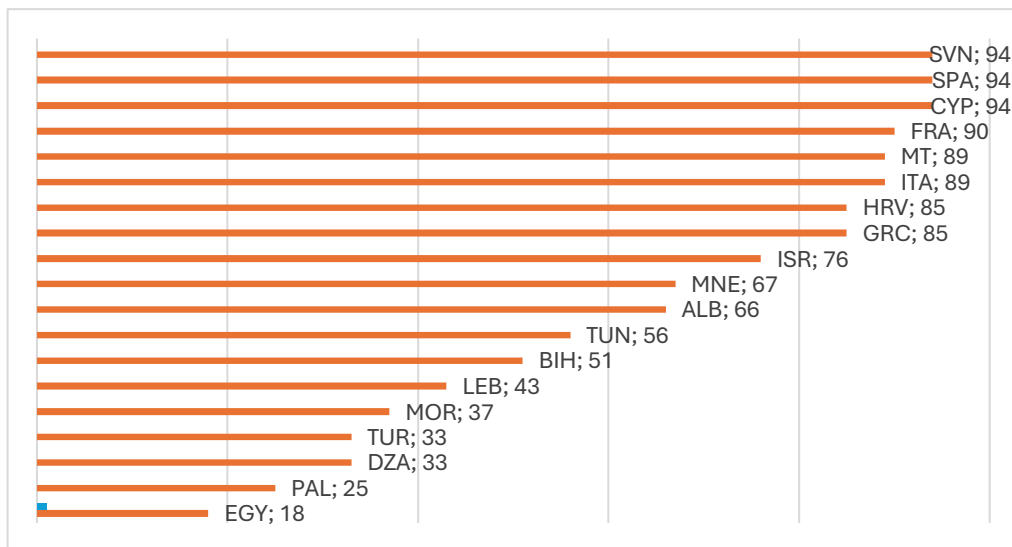
In the Mediterranean region, the status of democracy and fundamental freedoms has continued to backslide or remained steady over the past years. Actions against human rights defenders, journalists and activists, threats and legal harassment, especially during conflicts or unrest, have become more frequent. The extensive powers, permitted to governments under the Covid-19 pandemic, have in many countries exacerbated illiberal and authoritarian trends. Affected by unexpected international and economic pressures, many countries have not devoted the sufficient financial resources needed to combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law and access to justice, build effective and inclusive governance institutions, and protect rights and fundamental freedoms.

However, the evolution of governance and democratic indicators in the Mediterranean region between 2020 and 2024 reveals significant disparities. Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries generally exhibit weaker scores, reflecting important governance challenges. Notably, Tunisia experienced the most severe decline (-14 points), highlighting democratic backsliding and institutional erosion such as the suspension and dissolution of parliament, and the enactment of a new constitution that consolidates executive power. Egypt (-3), Morocco (-3), and Algeria (-2) also registered declines, indicating persistent governance and rule-of-law challenges. Political regimes often have shown unwillingness to pursue genuine democratic reforms and protect fundamental freedoms.

⁹ <https://www.sdg16.plus/>

¹⁰ In 2023, 59 state-based conflicts were recorded in 34 countries, the highest number of conflicts registered since 1946 (Rustad 2024).

Figure 7 – Freedom House Index in the Mediterranean region



Source: the author. Data: Freedom House, 2024

EU Mediterranean states maintained stable and higher scores, with Cyprus, Spain, France, Italy, Malta, and Slovenia consistently scoring above 85. However, the pressures prompted by populist and nationalist movements have contributed to the proliferation of more restrictive norms and regulations on civil rights and no discrimination principles.

Across the Mediterranean, governments have stepped up their pressure on civil society, liberal movements, opposition parties, the media and human rights defenders alike by devoting unprecedented resources to criminalizing strategies against opponents. Civil society in the southern Mediterranean has in recent years faced strong repression with states that have introduced more severe restrictions on civil society organisations, freedom of press and of association. Egypt has maintained its restrictive regulation on NGO laws, for example. And other countries in the region - Tunisia and, to a less extent, Morocco - have equally found ways of constricting civil society operations. In Europe, illiberal parties have gained unprecedented political victories and populist movement are no longer marginal protest actors who challenge the liberal democratic norms of the establishment. Rather, they have achieved – even if in coalition majorities – political power and have definitively occupied political institutions, becoming de facto an integral part of the political establishment. Collaborations between civil society organizations, state actors and international actors like the EU are also increasingly put under pressure from new populist political forces, and increasing instability.

Corruption continues to divert resources from sustainable development in the region. Corruption was among the triggers that led to the 2011 Arab uprisings, coupled with deficiencies in economic development and growth and a lack of social justice. Anti-corruption initiatives in many of the countries of the Southern shore of the Mediterranean did not meet the expectations of protesters. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI, as assessed by Transparency International) indicated that reform progress in this area of the region was slow, with the global average corruption score among 180 countries of 43/100. In 2022, Egypt ranked 141st,

scoring 30/100. Morocco was in a slightly better position in 107th place. Its score was still below the global average at 38/100. Tunisia was 100th among 180 countries, with a score of 40/100.

Anticorruption reforms have failed for different reasons. In some countries, although the implementation of some anti-corruption regulation occurred, political (and military) elites resisted any meaningful reform. Secondly, reticent governments have applied different and variegated obstructionist tactics that included tight control over anti-corruption agencies and other local actors, and/or the explicit delay of anti-corruption measures and prosecutions. Thirdly the obstacles preventing civil society organizations and political opposition from acting as 'controller' have hindered the enhancement of political and legal accountability. Fourthly, the transformative capacity assigned to international donors is limited. While international cooperation may instigate some administrative changes and improve the legal apparatus, it falls short in addressing the primary sources of grand corruption. Finally, the EU maintained collaboration with central authorities despite the apparent lack of commitment to combatting corruption. When security and stability concerns prevail over the pace of reforms in bilateral relations, EU-sponsored initiatives have contributed only to cosmetic changes in the fight against corruption (Dandashly and Kourtelis, 2024).

Partnerships

Nations and peoples of the world are interdependent across many dimensions. The Partnership principle recognizes the absolute necessity of working together to address common threats to human survival and wellbeing. SDG-17 fundamentally calls for strengthening global cooperation and could be considered a bridge for achieving all SDGs.

Generally, the partnership concept can be applied within and among nations. It usually includes principles such as: equality, respect, a non-acceptance of violence, war, abuse, cruelty, and exploitation; and ethics that support human caring and cooperation. Thus, partnership systems stand in stark contrast to the many current inequities in wealth, opportunity, health care, education, and so on, manifested globally among nations as well as within many nations.

Partnerships are defined as voluntary and collaborative relationships where all participants agree to work together to achieve a common goal or perform a specific task and share risks and responsibilities, resources, and benefits. Therefore, global and regional partnerships “are a form of international cooperation that are nested within broader statures and networks of global governance. These partnerships can take many forms, ranging from international organizations to informal networks among private actors” (Gorman, 2022).

According to the UN, SDG 17 aims to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development in five areas, namely, finance, technology, capacity building, trade, and systemic issues (policy and institutional coherence, enhance policy coherence, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and data monitoring and accountability). To achieve such a goal, the pathway of a global partnership for sustainable development led by the governments of different countries to strengthen the international cooperation is key. The use of multi-stakeholder partnerships at global, regional, national, and local levels is another important pathway to promote and share knowledge, technology, know-how, and financial resources to support the implementation of SDGs.

On the issue of regional cooperation and multi-stakeholders partnerships promoted by SDG 17, the Mediterranean present a complex and fragmented scenario. Under UN framework, for example, regional Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) such as the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea have been established since the mid-1970s. Regionally, inter-governmental institutions such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) are valuable and necessary political initiatives for multilateral cooperation in fundamental sectors such as regional stability, human development and regional economic Integration.

The Mediterranean is one of the areas in which the EU has devoted a great deal of creativity and imagination to rethinking cooperation frameworks (Khader & Amirah-Fernandez, 2020). In the past years, the EU has launched several relevant thematic regional and sub-regional cooperation programmes (WestMED, EUSAIR, EUSALP, ADRION, NEXT-MED, BLUEM, PRIMA) and financial mechanisms (ENI, Interreg) to improve the regulatory, business and political environment between and among Northern and Southern countries¹¹. The EU has strengthened its Mediterranean engagement through initiatives such as the New

¹¹ The Alliance for Mediterranean Cooperation was created in Barcelona in 2019 and it represents a unique network of networks working for multi-level transnational governance, and has set itself the goal of establishing cooperation, between local and regional authorities and international entities. The current members of the MedCoopAlliance are the CPMR

Agenda for the Mediterranean (2021) and the Global Gateway strategy (2022), both of which emphasize sustainable investment, digital transition, and governance reforms. Yet, an ambitious, integrated and high-level vision that can effectively and quickly shift the current negative development patterns and impact positively and structurally the region is currently missing.

30 years from the Process of Barcelona

The present situation in Euro-Mediterranean relations, as evidenced since the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995, has undergone significant transformations due to the impact of contemporary events and the recognition of past shortcomings. The erosion of the liberal global order has led to the acknowledgement of the impracticality of the original concept of exporting the European liberal democratic model to the Arab Mediterranean region. Secondly, in the context of the 'open strategic autonomy', the EU has declared its interest in promoting peace and guaranteeing the security of its citizens and territories. In an effort of *realpolitik* – and driven by populist movements – the EU has shifted from a value-based to an interest-based foreign policy, in which the securitization of the external border appears to prevail over human rights defence. European societies have become increasingly intolerant of illegal migration, a sentiment that populist parties have sought to capitalise on.

The reactions from the countries of the Northern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean have taken note of this change of orientation and starting from the early 2010 have begun a process of political and normative disengagement from the EU. The trends towards 'decoupling' of southern Mediterranean countries from the EU (Fabiani, 2021), has been accentuated in these last years by the Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Israel incursion into the Gaza Strip following the Hamas attacks in 2023. Taking advantage of the new international scenario, these countries have reduced their commitment to European conditionality by diversifying the nature of their partnerships (Hernando de Larramendi and Azaola Piazza, 2024). Along these lines lie their interest in exploring alternative cooperation framework, such as BRICS which Egypt joined in 2024.

The allocation of responsibility for this new scenario can be distributed equally between the EU and the governments of the region. The EU's inability to address mobility and movements of people from the north and east of the Mediterranean in a systematic manner has led to the frustration of middle classes and elites' aspirations, thereby contributing to the weakening of the credibility of European promises. The securitization of migratory flows, entailing the externalization of border controls to authoritarian states in exchange for economic and political rewards, has also damaged EU values and undermined the credibility of its promises. A notable illustration of this is the double standard applied in the treatment of Ukrainian refugees, in contrast to the situation reserved for Syrian refugees in 2015. Finally, the ambiguous position adopted by certain European states in the face of the cruel and violent response by the Israeli government to Hamas attacks has also contributed to the distancing of Arab civil society from the EU, its member states and the Western world.

Of course, these greater autonomy and diversification of alliances presented by southern Mediterranean countries has been affected by the presence of new players in the region. Today, the Mediterranean is

Intermediterranean Commission, Pyrenees Mediterranean Euroregion, MedCities, Arco Latino, Adriatic Ionian Euroregion and Coppem.

increasingly a contested space where actors such as Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf States assert their influence, often bypassing traditional multilateral frameworks. Russia has leveraged security and energy diplomacy, deepening ties with Algeria and Libya while supporting non-state actors in conflict zones. China has expanded its presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in infrastructure and port investments in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. While China officially supports multilateral governance, its economic footprint often follows a bilateral approach that sidelines traditional Western institutions. Beijing's increasing role in debt financing for Mediterranean nations has the potential to shift power dynamics, by reducing EU influence in the region. Turkey pursues an assertive Mediterranean policy, balancing NATO commitments with regional ambitions in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and through its growing defense cooperation with North African states. Gulf States, particularly the UAE and Qatar, have increased investment in Mediterranean economies, particularly in energy and technology sectors, often filling gaps left by EU hesitations. Their growing influence in security and political stabilization efforts—such as in Libya and Tunisia—positions them as key external actors shaping the region's multilateralism.

The growing influence of non-Western actors in the Mediterranean must be assessed in the medium-long term. Considering the economic dependence of many Mediterranean countries from EU trade, it is unlikely to foresee a fully disconnection scenario. However, it is a fact today that the EU and the Euro-mediterranean relations will face increasing competition from alternative partnerships driven by Russia, China, and the Gulf States, some of which undercut EU priorities and interests.

4. Conclusions

If political instability and wars continue, in the near term, it is easy to imagine a more fragmented and chaotic Mediterranean region, where national states, the EU, international organizations and new global players compete intensely for political influence and economic resources and decouple from international cooperation and intergovernmental frameworks. The urgency to advance in the way towards sustainability would however suggest that some level of cooperation and mutual understanding is needed to avoid the catastrophic consequences of climate change and the several challenges that still are pending to fulfill the 5 principles of the 2030 Agenda: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership.

In the short-medium term, a more optimistic scenario for the region is also possible. A scenario in which states (and non-state actors) do not openly challenge the legitimacy of each other's domestic systems, compete on a few fronts but continue to engage in open trade, regional integration and cooperate on major issues such as climate change, rule of law and human rights.

Inspired by what Rodrik and Walt (2021) wrote in relation to the possible features of a new global order – and after having considered the current challenges that affect the Mediterranean region - the four main characteristics that are unlikely to change in the short-to-medium term can be listed as it follows:

1 | Power and decision making will be maintained at the state level.

Although the role of many different actors, such as international organizations, transnational social movements, international NGOs, regions and cities, central states will remain the basic deciders and gate keepers in the region. The presence of multiple actors, however, creates a multitude of interests that, under certain circumstances, open the way to propose actions and reach goals without relying on governments. But, in ultimate instance, it is important to stress that investors, NGOs and citizens and migrants are ultimately backstopped by rules enacted and enforced by governments.

2| A more fragmented global order and a less influential EU in the region

There is broad agreement that US and China will be significantly stronger than any other states in the global order. Nevertheless, no single power will be able to write and enforce all the rules of a future order by itself. The same applies to the Mediterranean region. The increasing relevance of the region in the geopolitical scenario has attracted the attention of new players that have begun to compete for political recognition and economic resources. This has occurred when, at the same time, the EU – for internal reasons and for some failures of the past – has lost attractiveness and normative power in the region. The character of the Mediterranean region in the next years will depend to a considerable extent on the state of relations among all these actors and their willingness (or refusal) to engage in multilateral cooperation. Pragmatically, there are important realms – climate change and sustainability, above all - where cooperation must include most, if not all, of the states in the region.

3| Interdependence.

Even if international trade can experience some retrenchment, it is plausible to think that most states will continue to seek mutual gains from economic integration and open economies. States will be interdependent in other ways as well: pollution and pathogens will not respect national borders, climate change affects the entire planet, and political events and natural disasters will sometimes spill across national boundaries.

4 | Ideological Diversity.

Finally, the analysis assumes that, today more than some decades ago, different states (and non-state actors) hold substantially different visions for how human societies should be organized and governed. In the Mediterranean region, democracies and autocracies will co-exist despite disagreements on core political principles. Significant variations among EU member-states have already appeared over the proper balance between governments and markets, the status of women or minorities, the role of religion. Today, it is hard to believe that stability in the Mediterranean world order will depend on the assumption that states of the region will adopt similar political-economic models.

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