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The Mediterranean Diet Day
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Sheikh Zayed Centre

Ladies and Gentlemen!

We are gathered here today to discuss one of the most cited diets in the media as well as in the scientific literature. This is the Mediterranean Diet. This diet, whose origins are lost in history, has risen to fame because of its positive health outcomes to individuals and populations. The interest in the Mediterranean diet as a nutritional model started, as you know, in the early sixties for the scientific community. However, this interest has been revived in the last decade for reasons that relate to several challenges that we are facing today on more than one level.

On the nutrition front, our quest to deal with malnutrition has shown limited success. The numbers of the undernourished are up again according to the last SOFI figures. Overweight and obesity are also on the rise. Over 670 million adults and 120 million girls and boys (5-19 years) are obese, and over 40 million children under 5 are overweight. In reality, diet-related diseases have become one of the major current challenges for policy-makers.

On the environmental level, the way we produce and consume food has had big negative impacts on our natural resources. Studies have shown that the agri-food system affects considerably the environment, accounting for almost 70% of freshwater and 20% of energy use, and contribute dramatically to greenhouse gas emissions and land use.

Therefore, the reduction of diet-related diseases and the improvement of environmental sustainability represent two of the major 21st century challenges. Sustainable, Healthy Diets indeed could significantly contribute to achieving both of these goals, i.e. improving consumer health and reducing the environmental impact of food production and consumption.

With the accumulated knowledge we have, the Mediterranean Diet stands out as a model of healthy diet that is acknowledged worldwide. It is recognized to have a preventive effect against excess weight gain, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and even some types of cancer. This has guaranteed the Mediterranean diet fame that has gone beyond its basin of origin. The American Dietary guidelines of 2015-2020, recommend the Healthy Mediterranean-Style Eating Pattern for the American population among three such dietary patterns because of its positive health outcomes. In 2019, the Mediterranean diet also won the top spot for the best overall diet out of 41 most popular diets according to U.S. News.

On the other hand, with the Mediterranean diet being characterized as a diet high in plant-based products and moderate to low amounts of fish, meat and dairy products, it has been shown to have low environmental footprints.

A recent study from Spain shows that water requirements for food production for a person adhering to a Mediterranean diet is significantly less than that for a person who does not, and the same is true for land use and greenhouse gas emissions.

Beyond nutrition and the environment, the Mediterranean diet has been acclaimed for the protection of biodiversity and local production making it an important contributor to economic and social development and a catalyst for the diversification of the agro and food industry and the promotion of small family-farming, especially women-headed enterprises.

In 2010, UNESCO acknowledged the Mediterranean Diet as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, stating that: ‘The Mediterranean diet involves a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions concerning crops harvesting, fishing, animal husbandry, conservation, processing, cooking, and particularly the sharing and consumption of food.

But what makes the Mediterranean so unique? I will borrow from the great French philosopher Fernand Braudel who wrote his famous book on the Mediterranean. He said it is “A thousand things at a time, not a landscape, but countless landscapes, not a sea, but a succession of seas, not a civilization, but civilizations piled on one another”. He emphasized that “for millennia everything has converged in the Mediterranean, enriching its story: men, animals, goods, ideas, religions, the art of living, and even plants”. With the exception of olives, vine and wheat – that are native to the Mediterranean, all other plants were born far from the Mediterranean, whether it is the tomato, this Peruvian; the eggplant, this Indian; or the bean, the potato, the peach. Yet all this has become the very landscape of the Mediterranean”.

The same is true for the people of the Mediterranean, those born on its shores or descendants from those who, in distant times, sailed on its waters or cultivated its lands and terraced its fields. The Mediterranean is a land of confluence that has shaped and been shaped by the interaction of many civilizations. This is reflected in the common features of the dietary model that has resulted from this interaction and also in the specificities of the different versions of the Mediterranean diet.

In a world where migration from the South to the North is becoming a top priority, the Mediterranean is an example of the successful and peaceful interaction of different peoples and civilizations in one territory. This interaction was able to produce, among other things, this cultural and food model that is full of colors, aromas and memories marking the identity of the Mediterranean people.

Sadly, the Mediterranean diet is threatened today by many factors, chief among them is the nutrition transition. With rising incomes, changes in economic conditions and fast pace of life, home cooking is dying out. The skills of the Mediterranean–type cooking are not being passed on to the younger generation. We need to exert more efforts to protect the Mediterranean diet and to promote its principles.

This requires the collaboration between the Mediterranean countries themselves. I am happy that Italy will lead an Action Network under the Decade of Action on Nutrition on Traditional, healthy and sustainable diets. This is an opportunity to join forces to protect the Mediterranean Diet.

FAO stands ready to support the Mediterranean countries in preserving the Mediterranean diet as cultural heritage and as a model of sustainable healthy diets.