Egyptian farmer Mahmoud Seif talks about the frustration of not being able to find a market for his crops. See page 4-5
Photo: Karen Robinson/Oxfam
The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement (Euro-Med) – also known as the Barcelona Process – is marking its tenth anniversary with celebrations in the city of its birth this November. But, for some, the Mediterranean sky will be clouded with disappointment and disillusion.

Repeated rhetoric about security, stability, and prosperity won’t make the future any brighter for the people of the Mediterranean and Europe.

Oxam is calling for substance. And we’re calling for action. Euro-Med has the potential to bring about fundamental change across the region – and the time to make this change is now.

When the Euro-Med Agreement was announced, it was hoped that this would herald a new age in relations between the European Union (EU) and her southern Mediterranean neighbours – and bring unprecedented opportunities to millions of people. The Barcelona Process promised ‘shared prosperity’: but, so far, there have been few tangible benefits for poor people who live in southern Mediterranean countries.

Many people are still in need. Across the southern Mediterranean, poverty is on the increase – in some parts, 45 per cent of the population is living below the poverty line. And, in rural areas, the figure is often higher: small producers have even less chance of earning more than $2 per day.

The Euro-Med Agreement is called a ‘partnership’: this term implies equality and mutual benefit. Yet Euro-Med risks becoming an example of the EU taking all from its neighbours, while giving nothing but rhetoric and empty promises in return. Euro-Med must have equality at its heart.

Creating opportunities for change

Current negotiations to make the idea of a Mediterranean free-trade zone a reality by 2010 must address the inequalities between European and southern Mediterranean economies. These negotiations are a golden opportunity to use the existing regional trade agreement under Euro-Med to make trade fair for poor farmers in southern Mediterranean countries.

Trade talks should address the needs of poor producers in southern Mediterranean countries. Many cannot get their produce to market. Instead, they are forced to sell their fruit and vegetables to middle-men, at an unjustifiably low price. The producers have no alternative, other than to leave their produce to rot in the ground. And it’s keeping their families trapped in poverty.

Euro-Med has announced plans to implement a development programme for people living in rural areas – scheduled for 2007. This is too slow. People need change now.

The five-year work programme drawn up by the EU outlines a vision for the future. But plans for the future must have tangible impact, and make a difference to the lives of poor people.

Bringing lasting peace to the region

Next year, the EU plans to hold a conference on human rights. This initiative needs to get to the heart of the major issues that affect people day after day. Transparent governance, respect for human rights, and freedom of the press must be moved up the Euro-Med agenda.
It is important that the Barcelona Process is seen within the context of a fast-changing political environment. It must not shy away from tackling the major political crises of the region. True dialogue across the Mediterranean cannot take place if the process fails to address essential issues – such as the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and the dispute over Western Sahara.

Every opportunity should be taken to try to resolve conflicts in the region, which affect the lives of so many people. Euro-Med could become a valuable forum for discussion between European and southern Mediterranean states that helps to bring lasting peace.

**Becoming more relevant to people**

The southern Mediterranean is always close to the top of the international news agenda. But many people have never even heard of Euro-Med, or the Barcelona Process.

Until Euro-Med becomes less opaque, and of clearer relevance to everyone, it will continue to be seen to be a product of European bureaucracy, with little benefit for the people of the southern Mediterranean.

For it to become more relevant, the EU must seize this moment to develop the Euro-Med Agreement, so that it addresses the needs of everyone who lives in the southern Mediterranean region. Only then will the sun truly shine on the Barcelona Process.

In this special edition of *People Making Change*, released to mark the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process, we have gathered stories that illustrate the challenges that many people in southern Mediterranean countries face – and what Oxfam is doing to help them to cope.

These are people with whom Oxfam International is working. You will read about our work with poor farmers, factory workers, and people who are facing human-rights violations. Life is not easy for so many in the southern Mediterranean: Euro-Med, as an established and recognised political process, has the potential to have a major impact on people’s lives and livelihoods.

**Oxfam International** is a confederation of 12 non-government organisations from around the world, which share the same goal. In this edition of *People Making Change*, ‘Oxfam’ refers to Oxfam International, unless otherwise stated.
Looking for a miracle

Mahmoud Seif grows potatoes, spinach, onions, animal fodder, and Molokhiyya—a leafy herb used to make a traditional Arabic dish. His small plot is in Rahawouy village in Giza, a vast district famous for Egypt’s pyramids.

Mahmoud can never be sure whether he’ll get a decent return for the time and investment that he has put in. “We don’t easily find a market for our onions – even when we do manage to sell them, they don’t even fetch the price of the seeds. It’s the same with the potatoes,” he explains.

Mahmoud grows more than his wife and four children need – and he can’t make a sufficient livelihood from what he can sell in the village. “To make a living, I need to sell the rest in Cairo – but the middle-man only buys from me if he can make a good profit from my produce.”

Selling the produce is not the only problem. A change in the land law has impoverished Egyptian farmers. The cost to rent agricultural land has increased massively. In the 1950s, the government asked landowners to divide their land into small plots and rent them to farmers on long-term leases at low prices, capped by the government. But in 1992, a new law allowed landowners to charge any rent they liked – or even evict tenant farmers.

Mahmoud rents just under half a hectare of land: before 1992, annual rent was around 600 Egyptian pounds (£60). Today, he has to pay five-times as much.

When asked about support from the government, Mahmoud shakes his head sadly. The government runs an agricultural co-operative that sells seeds and fertilisers to farmers, and then buys back their produce. But because of changes in government policy, support through these co-operatives has deteriorated. Farming materials are no longer sold at subsidised prices. Farmers say they prefer to find alternative buyers for their crops, because the government schemes don’t give them a good price any more.

In Minia, 250 kilometres south of Giza, farmers are now working together to find alternative solutions, and to export their produce to Germany. With the help of Oxfam GB’s partner organisation, CEOSS*, farmers are signing agreements with companies before they even put the seeds in the ground.

Ashaf Lotfi explains: “We grow garlic together, and sell it to companies who will export it. We have cancelled the middleman. Now, farmers in the group get a better price, and a better income.”

“I have been growing garlic for six years. I used to get six tonnes per feddan (approx. 0.4 hectare) but CEOSS helped me to find new seeds that produce 13 tonnes per feddan. I used to sell my garlic for 600 Egyptian pounds per tonne (£60),

*CEOSS (Cooperatives of Sanitation and Social Services)
but it now fetches 1,000 pounds (£100) per tonne because the cloves are larger.”

On his two feddans of land, Ashaf also grows a variety of high-quality vegetables: red and white potatoes, huge cabbages, aubergine, peppers, sweetcorn, and sunflowers. So far, it is only the garlic that is exported. The market for the rest of the vegetables is less certain. Some is sold in the village, and some is sold to merchants in Cairo. But Ashaf never knows the price beforehand, and the market fluctuates a lot.

“I want to export for the sake of my children,” he says. “The eldest has just graduated from university but I have five others who want to go and study when they are older.” Ashaf explains that it’s not easy to find a job after university. Nevertheless, Ashaf thinks it’s unlikely that his children will continue in farming.

Ten years ago, the Egyptian government – along with 11 other southern Mediterranean states – signed a partnership agreement with the European Union, called the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement. One of the aims of this is to create a free-trade zone in the region by 2010.

The vision of the Euro-Med agreement is to ‘create an area of shared prosperity’, but Oxfam is concerned that opening up both EU and southern Mediterranean markets might have negative knock-on effects for poor farmers in countries such as Egypt, where many are already struggling to make a living.

Oxfam believes that these countries should be allowed free access to the European market, while being allowed to protect their home markets at the same time. In addition, the EU should support southern Mediterranean governments to provide better assistance, in terms of infrastructure and training, to poor small-scale farmers.

For Mahmoud, selling his crops abroad is a distant dream; he would be happy to be able to sell them in Cairo for a decent price. He says he is looking for a miracle to change things for the better.

“We have cancelled the middleman. Now, farmers in the group get a better price, and a better income.”

Ashaf Lotfi

Hard work: Egyptian farmer Mahmoud Seif spreads dried manure over his fields beside a tributary of the river Nile. Photo: Karen Robinson/Oxfam

A good buy: Ashaf Lotfi sells a huge cabbage to Fataya, a customer from his village. He sells some vegetables locally, but he’d prefer to export his produce. Photo: Karen Robinson/Oxfam

What Oxfam is doing
Through our partner CEOSS, Oxfam GB is supporting small farmers in Egypt. Oxfam is campaigning together with other organisations in the Middle East to make sure that farmers get a fair deal under the Euro-Med partnership. We are working with:

• The Land Centre for Human Rights (Egypt) www.lchr-eg.org
• JOHUD (Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development) www.johud.org.jo
• The Lebanese Agricultural Workers Syndicate
• Union of Agricultural Work Committees (Occupied Palestinian Territories) http://uawc.net
• Friends of the Earth Middle East www.foeme.org

find out more...
www.oxfam.org.uk/euromed
Oum-keltoum Al-Filali loved her job. For 20 years, she worked in a German-owned clothing factory in Fès, Morocco.

She earned a decent salary and worked regular hours, making women’s clothes and underwear. “We were all proud to be part of the company,” she says.

In 2003, without warning, the German managers suddenly disappeared and were replaced by local staff. Oum-keltoum began to hear rumours that the factory was relocating to a country where labour is cheaper.

The new managers were tasked with winding down production. Working hours dropped dramatically. “Our salary fell to less than 30 Euros a month (£20) – it was not enough for us to look after our families,” recalls Oum-keltoum.

Eight months later, the factory closed down altogether. Oum-keltoum and her 250 colleagues lost their jobs without warning or redundancy: “We were devastated. After 20 years of good work, we were told that we were too costly.”

Oum-keltoum’s story echoes across Morocco’s main industrial zones of Tangiers, Rabat, and Casablanca. In the last two years, an estimated 95,000 jobs – mostly held by women – have been lost in the textiles and clothing sector.

The recent end of an international trade agreement called the Multifibre Agreement has significantly reduced Morocco’s chance of competing on the EU market. Under this agreement, developing countries had specific quotas for textiles that each was allowed to export to the EU and the US. At least this Agreement gave countries such as Morocco a reasonable chance to sell their textiles in these foreign markets. But, since the Agreement expired in January 2005, developing countries are competing in a free-for-all for any market share. In Morocco, women have been hit hardest. Three quarters of women employed in the private sector work in textiles factories. Oum-keltoum and her colleagues were determined not to be defeated. With the help of local trade unions and the Centre des Droits des Gens (CDG), they tried to claim the redundancy pay to which they were entitled.

CDG is an Intermón-Oxfam* partner organisation that advocates for women workers’ rights. Aouatif Amria, CDG’s co-ordinator, arranged for the women to meet with a member of the local authority who deals with labour legislation. And when the factory manager refused to meet the women, CDG helped every worker to file their individual cases in court.

In May 2005, after many delays, the court ruled in favour of the women workers.

Oum-keltoum was promised £2,000 compensation. But a loophole in Moroccan law means that there is no way to take a foreign company to court, so it was the local manager of the factory who had to pay up. Oum-keltoum explains: “Our Moroccan boss claims he does not have enough money to pay us. And where are the Germans now?” Oum-keltoum has not yet received a single dirham of the money owed to her.

Because lack of labour-law enforcement is a huge problem, particularly for women, CDG has joined Morocco’s two largest trade unions, two women rights groups, and a high-profile human rights
In the last two years, an estimated 95,000 jobs have been lost in Morocco’s textiles and clothing sector. Local government and employers are not solely responsible for upholding women workers’ rights: foreign buyers and importing countries also have a responsibility for ensuring that people working in global supply chains can enjoy decent pay and conditions. And the security that they’ll receive compensation if the factory moves elsewhere.

The Alliance also wants the government to set up a fund to compensate workers adequately when foreign-owned factories are closed; trade unions to be allowed to operate effectively; and a tightening-up of the authority of the work inspectors – these civil servants rarely have the transport to visit the factories, and often turn a blind eye to breaches of labour law.

The Euro-Med Agreement has the potential to put the right structures in place to promote international labour standards in Mediterranean countries. Regional trade agreements, such as the Euro-Med agreement, should include an enforceable commitment by the Moroccan government to protect and promote labour standards as set down by the International Labour Organisation. By providing financial and technical assistance to those worst hit by the end of the Multifibre Agreement, the EU could help to manage the negative knock-on effects of increased liberalisation.

Spanish clothing companies – brands such as Zara, Mango, Cortefiel and Induyco – source textiles in Morocco. Intermón-Oxfam is now lobbying them, to ensure that their purchasing practices are ethical, and in line with their claims for being socially responsible. Oxfam International is doing similar work with big-name international clothing brands that source materials in other developing countries.

*Oxfam in Spain*
Israel and the Palestinian Territories

The Gaza Strip has been under intense international scrutiny during the past few months. But while the full impact of the Israeli disengagement has yet to be seen, many Gazans say that, although the settlers have left, they still are under occupation.

Raji Sourani has lived in Gaza all his life. He says that life in Gaza has not improved at all since the Israelis removed the settlements and military bases in September 2005.

Mr Sourani is Director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR). Based in the Gaza Strip, and supported by Novib (Oxfam Netherlands), PCHR is defending the rights of Palestinian civilians who live under Israeli occupation – and is working to build a democratic Palestinian state.

“In the ‘disengagement’, Israel has closed all of Gaza’s borders – we cannot leave the Gaza Strip by land. The fishermen have not been fishing. We cannot leave by sea either. For us, ‘disengagement’ does not mean freedom, but the end to the possibility of freedom,” he says.

Palestinians cannot leave by air either. The only international airport in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in the southern Gaza town of Rafah, has been closed since February 2001, when Israel bombed the area. Within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Israel has imposed a system of checkpoints, settlements, settler-only roads, and the separation barrier which prevents Palestinian civilians from moving freely.

According to the World Bank, this has caused the worst economic depression in recent history: In 2005, 68 per cent of Gazans were living off less than $2 per day.

“This is only the tip of the iceberg of the human rights violations,” explains Mr Sourani. “I know people who are sick, waiting to leave the Gaza Strip for urgent treatment – but they are trapped. In the West Bank, my brother in law has had his house divided by a huge wall, built by Israel.”

“In 2000, Israel signed an agreement with the EU (known as the ‘EU-Israel Association Agreement’) which – among other things – lays down terms of trade, and agreements on democracy and human rights.

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Israel and the Palestinian Territories

Humanitarian and Human Rights Law,” says Mr Sourani.

In the Barcelona Declaration’s chapter on political and security co-operation, participating partners declared their commitment to democracy and human rights. They have entered into contractual relations, in which the respect for democracy and human rights is an essential component. Through political dialogues, partners can raise issues of concern with others, and take appropriate measures if human rights commitments are not met.

“At the same time, we have to deal with the internal breakdown of law and order and human rights violations inside the areas under control of the Palestinian National Authority,” says Mr Sourani.

“The persecution of human rights defenders, torture of people in their custody, the failure to conduct fair trials, and attempts to interfere with the law on independence of the judiciary – to name a few – are a real challenge to democracy.”

Palestinian civilians are the ones who suffer the most under these difficult conditions. Women have the added burden of living in a society largely dominated by men: many women are deprived of their basic rights – such as custody of their children, alimony payments, social exclusion from jobs, and the right to an education. PCHR provides women with free legal aid in the Sha’ria Courts to help them to achieve their rights.

The people of the Gaza Strip still hold out hope that their situation will improve. On Mr Sourani’s wall is a quotation by Robert F. Kennedy. It reminds him that whenever someone strikes out against injustice, it creates a tiny “ripple of hope” that connects with millions of others and builds “a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and injustice”.

Together with our partner organisations, Oxfam continues to work towards a free and just Palestinian society, free of Israeli occupation, with respect for international humanitarian law, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. 

• For more information, visit: www.pchrgaza.org
• At the time of going to press, talks were taking place to improve Palestinian’s access across Gaza’s borders.

The EU is in a strong position to raise human rights violations with Israel.

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Women have been hit hardest by the downturn in Morocco’s clothing and textiles industry. Full story page 6-7
Photo: Helen Maleno

Garlic in Egypt: CEOSS, Oxfam’s partner, is helping poor farmers to improve their incomes by working together and exporting garlic to Germany. Full story page 4-5
Photo: Karen Robinson/Oxfam

Children standing in the wreckage of a demolished home in the Gaza strip. Full story page 8-9
Photo: Andy Hill/Oxfam