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Are Geographical Indications a laboratory for the agroecological transition? The cases of products from French small ruminants productions.

While livestock farming activities appear in the spotlight with ongoing global changes, the agroecological transition is seen as a way to promote their sustainability (Gliessman, 2016). In France (and elsewhere in Europe), a significant part of these livestock farming activities have developed approaches under geographical indications (GIs). GIs, considered as tools for protection, way to enter into a market through segmentation, and tools for territorial development (Cei et al., 2019), are, more recently, put forward, by institutions as well as by stakeholders, in their capacity to contribute to sustainability (Vandecandelaere et al., 2021). Indeed, the valorization of a “terroir” (Casabianca et al., 2011), as a “common”, leads to the impossibility of relocation and a strong territorial anchoring (Millet and Casabianca, 2014). In addition, the local governance put in place for the supply of these food goods is seen as an essential tool for this sustainable development.

This contribution asks the capacity of GIs to be a laboratory for the agroecological transition. Several case studies, covering dairy and meat products from French small ruminants, are mobilized, such as Crottin de Chavignol PDO and Brousse du Rove PDO, in dairy goat production, Roquefort PDO in dairy sheep production, Barèges Gavarnie PDO and Sisteron PGI in sheep meat.

In GI systems (GIS), two major points of support must be considered to enhance agroecological transition. In certain respects, they can also constitute obstacles to this agroecological transition. The first point of support is made up of the specifications, and in particular the “method of obtaining the product”, which sets out the production and processing practices that make sense for its typicality. These specifications highlight criteria in line with the agroecological transition. These engage mostly for extensive productions, based on the development of local genetic material (Ligda and Casabianca, 2013). The majority of them induce a match between the physiological needs of the herd and the existing resources, in particular the growth of the grass and work on the farms’ autonomy (and therefore the closure of nutrient cycles). Seasonality and mobility may represent major stakes for such production systems based on spontaneous resources and landscape management. Therefore, the multiple dimensions of livestock farming, to which these specifications address, invite stakeholders to systemic reflection at the scale of the farms and the one of the territory. Nevertheless, this normative framework questions the capacity of GIS to integrate innovations and the diversity of practices and performances, which could be useful to engage a disruptive agroecological transition.

The second point of support is the organization of the downstream sectors, around the GI products and the others, associated. This constitutes a framework for action, alongside the governance of

the approach under GI, considering the coordination modes, the technical support, the knowledge and strategies on regional, national and international markets, the tools of transformation and logistic (Vidal et al., 2022). If those aspects are strengths in certain cases, they could be weaknesses. We note especially the concentration of operators and the management by mass retailing (Nozières-Petit et al., 2018), inducing a standardization of products and indirectly of farms, and the multiplicity of labels, useful for transactions but deleterious for consumers. Moreover, short chains and collective branding may appear as useful tools for structuring territorial foodscapes around GIS enhancing their anchoring into the local and not only their capacity to circulate outside of the production area.

By analysing these two points of support, we highlight the strengths and the weaknesses of GIS systems, considering intrinsic and extrinsic aspects, for being laboratory for the agroecological transition.

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