

Product qualification and participatory guarantee systems

Introduction

The stakes of the Mediterranean island mountains are considerable. In fragile ecosystems that are threatened by local and global anthropic pressures, rural communities need to find motivation and means of subsistence that guarantee the sustainability of a living economic and social fabric.

To meet these challenges, this paper proposes to discuss how processes of origin qualification, as **border-object** negotiations (Star, Griesemer, 1989), can create participatory platforms for discussion that enable rural communities to define virtuous development paths for both their economic and social development and for the preservation of their human and natural heritage. The **participatory guarantee** system is a possible tool in this qualification process, which we illustrate with the "Terra Thessalia" brand in Greece.



The qualification of origin products as border object negotiations

Border objects are formalised by the prior definition of "containers", the nature and form of which are agreed upon by the stakeholders and which may take various forms (for example a standard or a museum collection). This discussion on the container allows for a convergence of understanding ("common language") and then a convergence of interests between several stakeholders who have individual interests that are sometimes far apart, in order to achieve a common and beneficial objective. The very existence of this common objective can make it possible to overcome antagonisms in order to reach consensus or compromise.

The qualification of origin-linked products is a collective process anchored in a territory delimited by geographical coherence and an identity rooted in a history, which translates into a reputation. The qualification process enables producers to have the product, its link to the terroir and its typicality recognized by third-party experts. As an achievement marking an agreement between producers and sometimes the competent public authority, the specification of an origin-linked product is a border object (Vinck, 2009). Indeed, it is a standard and therefore a "container" with several categories: definition of the product, its composition, its manufacturing method, its characteristics, as well as the modalities of sensory verification and validation of its commercial identification according to a procedure defined by a national legal basis, sometimes reinforced by a supranational level (for example, the European Union defines these aspects in a Community regulation for PDOs and PGIs). Producers, who have their own issues at stake, are united behind common objectives such as the protection of their product against usurpation, a common promotion plan that will make it possible to develop sales and profits for producers, or the safeguarding of a gastronomic heritage.

The question we are asking ourselves here is whether this procedure can serve as a basis for the preservation of natural resources in the particularly fragile Mediterranean island mountain areas.

The virtuous circle of origin-linked products for sustainable ecosystems

The specifications of an origin-linked product can be the driving force behind the 'virtuous

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circle' of its remuneration but also the preservation of natural resources (Vandecandelaere, Arfini, Belletti, & Marescotti, 2010) (Figure 1).

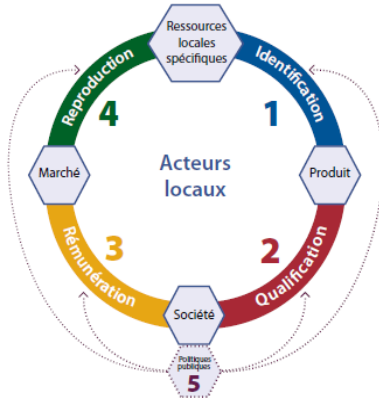


Figure 1 -Virtuous circle of originator compensation (Vandecandelaere et al., 2010)

In an identification phase, the local stakeholders and their partners make an awareness and an evaluation of the potential of the product, in terms of specificity in relation to the geographical origin (evaluation of the link to the terroir), and in terms of potential for sustainable development. A tool has been developed to guide stakeholders in this identification phase (Barjolle, Vandecandelaere, & Salvadori, 2012).

In a qualification phase, value chain stakeholders and their partners inside and outside the region reflect and negotiate collectively to establish collective rules that are set out in a specification, which is subject to formal review by the administrative authorities in charge of implementing the legislation around PDO-PGI (e.g. in France, the INAO, which then transmits to the European Commission services).

The remuneration phase is that of the marketing of the product after it has been certified as complying with its specifications, and this marketing is synonymous with income generation for the various players in the sector. This remuneration passes through one or more mechanisms of collective quality management, and the prices obtained by each link in the chain depend on several aspects, such as quality, logistical efficiency but also the efficiency of the collective management of the product.

Based on the remunerations obtained by the different links, it is possible to reinforce the sustainability of the system through targeted actions decided at the individual or collective level. This sustainability can be measured by different scientific approaches (Schmitt et al., 2016).

The question that arises when a PDO (or a PGI) is already in place, and sometimes on the territorial scale of an entire country, is how to negotiate agreements that take into account the existing PDO reference frame while allowing local specificities for the protection of agroecosystems to be respected, while standing out beyond the reference frame and the identification of the PDO on the market. Analyzing the issues at stake and transposing them into an extension of the PDO specifications, more demanding or more specific on certain aspects, is a process that can be a winner. However, as it is a question of bringing the standard closer to the realities on the ground within a small territory, and as the actors must understand the meaning of the approach and be motivated to build and bring it to life, their direct participation is a crucial condition for success. This is why the approach of a **participatory guarantee system (GSP)** is a promising possibility that has already proved its worth.

The participatory guarantee system as a tool for preservation and development

The GSP is a particular modality of co-construction of a production standard and its certification between producers and consumers of the production territory. Together, the modalities of agricultural production, processing and conservation of the product, its packaging and its identification (guarantee mark and logo) are defined in a set of specifications and guides to good practice. It is similar to a border object because the GSP must be "translated" into a language and

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a logic common to the stakeholders whose interests diverge in order to reach a consensus on the content of some of the fundamentals of local collective action.

The GSP, as a platform for negotiation between stakeholders with stakes in the Mediterranean mountainous island territories, is a particular form of organization that makes it possible to address all aspects of territorial development and the preservation of natural resources. Aggravated by the threats linked to climate change, the major challenges are environmental: Mediterranean mountains suffer from a lack of water resources, loss of biodiversity, soil damage and forest fires. There are also social issues, with the loss and ageing of communities, infrastructure and training needs to overcome isolation and the digital divide. Finally, there are also cultural issues to avoid the loss of know-how due to the rural exodus, and economic issues, as the mountain environment imposes additional costs on businesses in terms of access to connecting infrastructures and isolation.

Faced with these challenges, the profound transformation of agro-sylvo-pastoral production systems will enable island mountain communities and territories to define their vision and action plan to restore ecosystem health and improve human health. Through enhanced sustainability and resilience, preservation and development strike a balance between the maintenance of fragile natural environments, economic values and business vitality. The GSP is a tool that paves the way for this transformation.

As an example of the role of qualification as a process for the realisation of a border object of particular interest in a Mediterranean mountain context, we can cite the GSP "Terra Thessalia". Thanks to the funding of the LACTIMED project in 2012, a local development process was launched in close consultation with livestock farmers, pastoral communities and local authorities, but also with cheese dairies and consumers, as well as numerous technical and financial partners in the region and even beyond (Goussios et al, 2014). Admittedly, Thessaly is not an island, but it is a Mediterranean mountain area, so some lessons and successes can serve as a basis for adapting its use in island areas. It should be noted that increasing added value through the implementation of the GSP is one of the objectives and an operational action of the National Strategy for the Development of the Mountain Municipalities of Cyprus, which has been in operation since 2020.



The recognition of Feta as a PDO and the reservation of this name for Greek production, by eliminating unfair competition from foreign Feta, represented an opportunity for the development of the large industrial dairies in Thessaly. Pastoral production and small-scale mountain cheese dairies have been placed in a new field of competition, marking a

halt to such production, the production costs of which are very high compared with those of modern livestock farms in areas where fodder production is fully mechanised and where feeding is automated and based also on productive breeds and the supply of concentrates. For the maintenance of the pastoral areas of the Pindos mountain range, as well as the mythical Olympus mountain range, a process of qualification of the "Terra Thessalia" Feta has been initiated under the aegis of the introduction of a participatory guarantee system (GSP) (Anthopoulou, Goussios, 2018) in order to enhance the value of cheese products with a specific quality linked to their origin.



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The "Terra Thessalia" brand was developed within the framework of the LACTiMED project. It is certified on the principle of local community participation. University laboratories have been closely involved in the process and have developed methods based on the most modern technology combined with traditional knowledge and practices of pasture management and cheese-making techniques. The collective management structure of the brand has developed its own means of guarantee, which includes official certification (Feta PDO controls, extensive analyses in

accredited laboratories).

The specifications are based on specifications relating to all areas of the dairy chain (grazing, breed of animal, local feed, health and product quality, etc.). The participatory certification governance scheme ensures that the quality mark is applied exclusively to products originating from the dairy territories of Thessaly. Finally, a good practice guide to guide farmers and to respect the specifications of the "Terra Thessalia" specifications has been developed, to engage producers in a way of managing animals and pastoral areas that preserves natural resources. The participatory guarantee system supports a shared vision of producers and consumers of "Terra Thessalia", strengthening their exchange of knowledge based on the principles of participation, reciprocity, transparency and trust. The impacts of this approach are perceived as positive by the actors, who continue their work around the brand, even after the end of the LACTIMED project. A more quantitative evaluation of the impacts has not yet been made, but the results are visible.



Conclusion

The qualification of origin products corresponds to a process that is accompanied by an interesting border object, in that it allows a convergence of interests of bearers of very different stakes who manage to speak a common language and produce specifications. As a driver of the virtuous circle of product remuneration, qualification is standardised and can extend an effective trade protection regime. However, if the territory of origin in the PDO specifications, for example, is very large, the examination of the effects of this protection on Mediterranean mountain territories may be insufficient, especially on the protection of fragile ecosystems and on the associated economic model. Therefore, in order to make the qualification of origin products a dynamic more sensitive to the specific issues of smaller territories, it is useful to create a new border object. The participatory guarantee system meets the definition of the border object well, in that it allows the translation of the issues into a common language resulting from the inter-knowledge developed between all the stakeholders in a territory. The local dialogue platform facilitates the completion of a new set of specifications and a participatory mechanism for its conformity certification, which engages agricultural producers, processors, but also other stakeholders, in a virtuous process of valorisation and preservation, following the example of the Terra Thessalia guarantee mark.

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