

Do regional food labels and brands contribute to GDSs?

This contribution focuses on food labels and brands available on the Swiss market that make promises regarding origin or regionality and analyses whether they contain sustainability promises that would contribute to the realisation of GDSs. In the minds of consumers, local origin is often associated with a sense of sustainability and this is strongly observed in surveys in Switzerland (1). Today, regional products account for about 4 % of the food market and this share is expected to grow faster than organic labels (2). However, some previous studies have shown that local origin alone is not a sign of sustainability, as for example distance per kilometre is not correlated with greenhouse gas emissions or different aspects may be contradictory (3). There is also enormous heterogeneity between farms and products at all levels (4).

In Switzerland, the number of food labels for regionality is particularly high, but they can also be grouped into general categories according to their characteristics. We propose four groups, summarised in Table 1. They are not mutually exclusive and many products have at least two.

In a next step, the requirements for these labels and brands were studied, based on what is publicly available. Sentences or parts of these requirements that are relevant to the field of sustainability were collected separately for analysis. The quality of the requirement has not been quantified at this stage, as the aim is to assess the coverage of the issues.

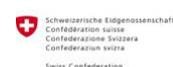
Table 1 : Categorization and evaluation of regional food standards in Switzerland

Type of standards	Mountain and nature parc labels	PDO and PGI	Regional brands	Supermarkets' brands
Ownership	State-owned	Mixed	Private	Private
Number of sub-brands or names	19 parcs and 2 mountain labels	20 PDO and 14 PGI	41 regional brands, all under 1 national label	1 or 2 per supermarket firm, total 8 considered
Typical region size	Parc-size to the whole Alp region	One or more cantons	Half-cantons to several small cantons	Several cantons to a fourth of the country
Governance of requirements	Requirements defined by federal ordinance, plus local additions per parc.	Principles defined by federal ordinance; requirements defined locally by product	Unified requirements at national level (the "regio-garantie" rules ⁱ), some local additions per region	Defined by companies, often copied or inspired on the regio-garantie rules ⁱ .
geographic delimitation in the value chain	raw products 90-100% from parc or mountains (with exceptions), 2/3 of the added value	PDO: all raw product and transformation in region. PGI: both or only one	Regio-garantie rule ⁱ	Variable, tend to the regio-garantie rule ⁱ , sold only in the region.
Quality of certification	Independent certification	Independent certification	Independent certification	Ca. 1/2 independently certified
Criteria in favor of SDGs (that are written in the requirements or proven in scientific studies)	Limitation of inputs, Individual goals towards landscape protection and biodiversity projects at parc level	Limitation of inputs, Keeping of local jobs and artisanship, maintenance of mountain pasture, limitation of some inputs (5)	Ban of GMOs	Only one brand invests benefits in local development projects, one other has additional requirement for cereals

Main organizers

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Critical aspects towards SDGs	Ecological criteria are locally defined, no overarching national requirements. Prominence of animal and alcoholic products	Prominence of meat products, only four plant-based non-alcoholic products	Many exceptions, also for unsustainable ingredients (sugar, cocoa, etc)	Many exceptions, also for unsustainable ingredients (sugar, cocoa, etc).
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The result is that, very generally, sustainability is a more anecdotal part of label requirements. Rather, environmental or social criteria are exceptions that occur randomly in some regions. The exception is that the "Regio-guarantee" rule prohibits GMO ingredients, but otherwise there is no mention of the environment in ordinances or directives at the national level. However, some local producer or supermarket organisations define additional criteria for specific aspects, but never for a global approach to sustainability. For example, one supermarket requires an additional label for integrated flour production. Some nature parks define mandatory participation in renewable energy or biodiversity and landscape protection projects or define that fruit must come from local breeds. Mountain or PDO labels define that 70-85% of the roughage for animals must be local. A regional label (out of 41) also requires an additional standard for animal welfare. With regard to the social aspect, a supermarket brand invests profits for regional development projects, but otherwise no mention is made of requirements regarding working conditions, income, etc. The requirement of at least 2/3 of the added value in the regions could, however, promote jobs and infrastructure in these regions. It has also been shown that PDOs can help maintain craft jobs in rural areas(5,6).

From a food point of view, it also appears that these brands and labels may disproportionately support unsustainable products. Indeed, ingredients that are very resource-intensive and whose value chain has proven sustainability problems, such as coffee or cocoa (7), are not excluded. Sugar is also a health problem, but instead of reducing the sugar content of products, there is an exception and any Swiss sugar can be used without any quality requirements. It should also be noted that 100 % of Swiss PGI are processed meat products. Only 4 PDOs are non-alcoholic plant-based products. This minority is also observable in the assortments of certain parks, sometimes to a lesser extent, and a similar trend can be observed for supermarket brands, although the products are more present in this category. In a context of targeting sustainability towards GDSs, it would be interesting to consider strategies to increase the use of plant-based and healthy products within regional brands and labels, particularly for GDSs 4 (health) and 12 (sustainable consumption and production). Efforts for the protection of landscapes and biodiversity and for rural employment (GDSs 8 and 15) are already present but could benefit from strengthened strategies and better communication towards the consumer.

References:

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