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Development of a territorial branding strategy, theoretical consideration, good practice and reference points for local application

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Introduction

Place branding (or territorial branding) has acquired particular attention in local development strategies as a means to shed light on place-specificity of assets and development action. Brands are ubiquitous in our lives, and the multitude of different place marketing and branding initiatives enhances expectations for beneficial outcomes. The wide-spread application of the concept in diverse rural development contexts suggests that challenges of fragmentation of local spaces and lack of critical mass might be overcome. Respective activities are based on expectations that “branding” might lead via product promotion to increased awareness and valuation of local assets. The thematic discussion is designed as a contribution from international experience of good practice and intends to refer to manifold examples of place branding activities in mountain regions. They aim at presenting conceptual aspects, challenges faced and beneficial outcomes realized through engagement of local actors in such strategies, and link to the planned activities of actors in the Local Action Group (LAG) Mestia.

By referring to lessons learnt all territorial branding strategies underscore that “place matters” and place aspects take a sensitive role in it. Action might extend to all the different sectors and local activities. To a high degree such activities refer to historical achievements and regional identity creation that is bound both to nature and socio-economic factors. Local production origin, in agriculture but also for non-agricultural products, quality development, geographical indications and linkages to cultural heritage are often an initial source for branding strategies. Presenting place-specific assets, designing areas as “destinations” for tourism flows, and conceiving linkages of attractiveness to landscape development and quality of life perceptions, all these aspects contribute to an integrated view on acknowledging local assets and nurturing local development.

With increasing inter-relation of spaces and global integration remote, mountain regions are under particular pressure to market forces. Programmes like LEADER/CLLD and other local development action are conceived as means to mitigate some of the weaknesses of rural locations and fragmented settlement. The role of territorial branding concepts and local initiatives have been explored in an online workshop on 27 August 2021. At that occasion key considerations of branding design and relevance for rural development strategies were presented and discussed in view of its potential use for LEADER implementation in Georgia and particularly future action of LAG Mestia. Beyond providing a forum of discussion on



LEADER application in addressed general issues for strategy elaboration and administrative adaptations to focus on local assets and place-sensitive valuation.

As local discussions afterwards clarified “territorial branding” covers a wide scope of actions and extensive aspects of diverse sectors and linkages. In view of a realistic assessment of potential implementation and capacity of local actors it was figured out that related activities would best be focused on a specific local product with particular qualitative and place-related features. Enhancing labelling of high-quality local cheese production was assessed as most powerful strategy by the LAG. Following this decision, the present paper also aims to draw on examples of mountain milk production and cheese processing in mountain contexts of Europe to provide reference schemes in the process of elaborating further steps of progressing with labelling activities for that type of mountain cheese in the municipality of Mestia. As will become visible examples in Europe are abundant, but at the same time very diverse, pointing to the huge scope of place-sensitivity and cultural embeddedness of shaping product labels and significance.

Territorial branding – theory and practice

In recent years developing production labels based on specific geographical indications has become a wide-spread practice. In particular, this is relevant for products from places with specific features and assets boosting of the specificity of those places and the particularities of place-based quality features. Place branding would cover very different fields of action, in particular it might relate to branding the place as a destination for tourism purposes (Pike 2005; Medway et al 2021) or attracting incomers to settle within a specific area through integrating emotional aspects (Gobe 2010) and territorial identity (Banini and Pollice 2015), or, in a quite different meaning, it would enhance product specificity by highlighting features of a product deriving from a particular place (WIPO 2021). The concept of place branding is closely based on the linkages of local production and action to effects on enhancing attractiveness for tourism development. Destination management is enhanced an important activity of regions and local areas to build on place specificity. Elaborating branding schemes through the use of geographical indications is a common means to make use of local potential. It enhances the visibility of attractive elements of places and has the power to contribute to processes of territorial identity shaping. It should be acknowledged that the concept is based on the appreciation of local culture as an important driver of narratives enabling and enhancing such place-sensitive strategies.

All aspects mentioned have substantial relevance for rural regions and are an important element in strategy elaboration of local development. The most influential programme available for rural regions within the EU is the LEADER programme. It represents a local development approach that has been launched in 1991 at a time when it became obvious that “rural development” is much more than sectoral achievements of agricultural production, processing and marketing. Since then LEADER and even more directly in its recent form of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) has addressed the challenges and opportunities of local areas and provided a participative tool to shape action that respond to place distinctiveness. As such LEADER/CLLD captures many aspects of “territorial branding” even if that terminology is not always used explicitly. As Magnaghi claimed the LEADER approach could be viewed as a rebirth of rural areas through “strong self-identification of local community, which takes new possession of its own territory, recognizing it in the history of the territory, in its environmental



balance, in its cultural, economic, aesthetic and organizational values, in a growth process lead by the promotion of its internal qualities” (1994, 33; cited from Banini and Pollice 2015, 11).

It should be mentioned that these processes are particularly long-term in nature. These characteristics of identity elaboration, community building and place branding commitment efforts affect both challenges for assessing programme performance after limited time periods and achieving sufficient support for required shifts in policy and local development orientation. As the alteration from an overwhelmingly short-term growth paradigm to a pathway towards long-term concepts and orientation requires the understanding and continuous support of local, regional and national actors, deep reviews of mainstream narratives have to gain in relevance (Krznicaric 2020). With regard to rural policy implementation it is apparent that language on shrinking rural regions is still coping with very similar challenges as in the 1990s. For example, in Italy rural policy was promoted then as providing “a place to live” (Magnaghi 1994) when a recent initiative calls for action “to re-settle the remote places of Italy” (Cersosimo and Donzelli 2020).

In its three decades of implementation without doubt LEADER has evolved substantially, placing various emphasis in its diverse programme periods and within divergent national and regional contexts. An overall assessment of the priority areas of intervention underscore the strong orientation in many rural regions towards tourism-related and culturally-rooted action by most LAGs (Dax and Oedl-Wieser 2016). Nevertheless, aspects of advancing the processing and value chain integration of local produce is only in few Local Action Groups a “flagship activity” of LEADER implementation. This is largely the case because elaborating products of geographical indications is linked to sector policy, aiming at elaborating agricultural processing and labelling activities. As such the topic of product development is overwhelmingly analysed separately from general territorial development schemes. The comprehensive study on the respective agricultural products making use of geographical indications in their labelling strategies focuses on production value (Chever et al. 2012). Mountain specific assessment of such activities show that mountains dispose of many examples with regard to mountain specific labels for products of geographic indication (EC 2009, Santini et al. 2013) with a significant concentration on milk products and cheese labelling.

The framework for products of geographical indication has been established in the EU following the establishment the PDO/PGI schemes in 1992 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 2081/92 (Regulation 2081/92). The abbreviations are designations for the first two schemes of geographical indications which were later on supplemented by additional options for agricultural products designation:

- PDO – protected designation of origin (food and wine)
- PGI – protected geographical indication (food and wine)
- GI – geographical indication (spirit drinks and aromatised wines); added by
- TSG - Traditional speciality guaranteed

Following negotiations with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) due to complaints by the United States and Australia in 1999 against the EU regulation of geographic al indications (GIs) for agricultural products and foodstuffs, a new regulation for the GI scheme was adopted in 2008 by the European Commission taking account of these concerns (Regulation 510/2006).



The EU quality policy intends to protect the names of specific products due to their unique characteristics and geographical origin or traditional know-how in producing it. Granting product names is dependent on a 'geographical indication' (GI) if they have a specific link to the place where they are produced. That GI recognition facilitates consumers to trust and distinguish quality products and, at the same time, supports producers to market their products better. Products under consideration or having been granted GI recognition are listed in quality products registers which include information on the geographical and production specifications for each product. Later on other EU quality schemes focusing on the traditional production process or products made in difficult natural areas such as mountains or islands were established to respond to their specific production conditions and quality design processes (Regulation 1151/2012).

The scheme was used in various countries at large scale (above all Italy and France; with a second group of particularly interested countries of Spain, Portugal and Greece and Germany), in others it is hardly present. Already in 2008 about 800 GIs (either for PDO or PGI) were approved (London Economics 2008), with rising interest and support thereafter. The most recent comprehensive EU study accounts for more than 3,200 GIs by the end of 2017 (AND International 2021, 6). According to the agricultural product type the up-take is very diverse, for agricultural products and foodstuffs (PDO, PGI and TSG) 43% of all GIs (1,367 products) were approved, different types of wines accounted for 49% (1,576 products), spirit drinks for 8% (235 products), and aromatised wines for 0.2% (5 products).

While the particular objective of that assessment study was the interest in its economic value, PDO and PGI schemes objectives also relate to the promotion of rural economies, diversification and income support, elaborate opportunities for remote or less-favoured areas and curb population decline of rural regions. As such the scheme links to core strategies of rural policy and might be seen in close interaction with other local rural development activities.

Agri-food and drink products whose names are protected by the European Union as "Geographical Indications" (GIs) represent a sales value of €74.76 billion, according to a study published today by the European Commission. Over one fifth of this amount results from exports outside the European Union. The study found that the sales value of a product with a protected name is on average double that for similar products without a certification.

In the European Union activities on elaborating mountain product labelling intensified since about 2000, based on stakeholder investigation and promotion of the concept (facilitated by Euromontana) linked to the exploration of the feasibility of related strategies (see EU-project EuroMARC). It resulted in the approval of the use of an optional quality term under the label "mountain product" by the European Union through the (EU) regulation No 1151/2012. For clarifying implementation aspects, the European Commission adopted also a delegated act (EU) No. 665/2014 in June 2014. These two legal documents are the formal basis for the implementation of respective labelling schemes making direct use of the mountain contexts as basis for indicating geographical indications. They were used by several countries since then to enhance mountain labelling of their agricultural products. Euromontana started in 2016 to assess the status of implementation and most recently monitored the implementation process by addressing 17 countries as referring to that legal base in May 2020 (Euromontana 2020).



Main aspects of territorial branding for mountain areas

The approval of the label for mountain products provided a substantial impetus to the discussion and elaboration of respective considerations. However, branding ideas and concern has a long tradition in mountain areas as it refers to strategies seeking to highlight specificity and even uniqueness of local qualities, procedures and cultural features of places. Interest in branding approaches evolved since long and covered a wide range of regions, including mountain contexts to a high degree. While it emerged strongly for marketing purposes in the period of strong economic (and tourism) growth in the second half of the 20th century, there was a lack of studies for destination branding until about 2000 (Pike 2005).

Since then, however, discussion intensified and peaked in the two years before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Török et al. 2020). Heterogeneity of implementation reveals contextual dependence and institutional and cultural interaction. What appears crucial is to take account of the need for a long-term elaboration of branding concepts and activities that can lonely be assessed for its effects after a substantial period of time (Vaquero Piñeiro 2021). This continuous engagement seems particularly important in regional situations with significant demographic challenges and restricted scope for economic diversification. Mountains are in general places that suffer from those characteristics, even if current reorientation argue for new narratives and a much wider scope of development approaches, also in these regional contexts.

Common issues for priorities in place branding strategies should address a number of influencing aspects. The brief list of relevant topics mentioned here is meant as a reminder of basic features that should not be neglected in implementation action even if projects might focus on product elaboration, marketing needs, production technology aspects, certification regulation, consumer demand and trust, as well as place-anchoring of the product:

- With mountain products in mind, territorial branding needs to be based on local knowledge, long-term experience, heritage legacy and important cultural characteristics. Examples on local development projects are numerous. While many have originated from local actors and administrations themselves, the EU has provided with its LEADER/CLLD programme a suitable scheme to nurture and enhance local action where awareness was limited or obstacles for development could not be overcome without an external incentive (Damjan 2005; Lešnik Štuhec and Vilman Proje 2019).
- Emphasising the nature of territorial branding as collective action is pivotal as against earlier focus of marketing approaches to enhance product image. Linking product development and labelling to its place of origin (Pike 2015) encompasses a view on participation and inclusion of local actors that adds community development as an important aspect in branding processes (Donner 2016).
- That collective action is related to a small geographical space. The local focus is considered to have an important role for territorial branding as place attachment is very often linked at that small-scale level. Concepts of endogenous development, place embeddedness (Donner et al. 2019) with beneficial impacts for rural municipalities involved in elaboration of products with geographical indications, experiencing



population growth and economic reorganization towards non-agricultural sectors and overall higher regional added-value (Crescenzi 2021).

- Further exploration of the diversification of regional economy, place marketing contributions and focus on a place-based strategy of development efforts sustain the important interrelation of these aspects. With different nuances aspects of shaping local strategies and implementation have pointed to the urgency of integrated approaches contributing to raising the “power of place” (Argent 2020). Qualitative assessment of territorial branding underpins the stimuli originating in finding place-sensitive narratives and translating them into labelling features that exert their influence both on local inhabitants, in supporting local identity processes, and for external users, including consumers, tourists, external views and exchange networks.
- As to the most widely used products and product range territorial branding in mountain regions is quite often built on agricultural products, underpinning that linkages to the food basis are an inherent strength of this type of regions, in many cases. Branding agricultural products thus starts from selecting local products as “flagship examples” that combine most of the elements required for a convincing territorial branding strategy. It is important to conceive such processes in a balanced manner, addressing technological, economic, knowledge and socio-cultural aspects for producers and providing meaning of labelling products linked to origin of places for consumers of products. Related branding studies suggest that there is “a firm focus on action rather than studies, reports for technical assistance; a positive attitude towards risk and innovation; and a search for practical solutions to multiple gaps in capacity” (Docherty 2012, 37).

From all the studies and surveys a particular high relevance of food for place branding activities and inspiring branding examples results. Freire and Gertner (2021) reveal the close interaction between local food design and destination management and mutual reinforcing activities. They highlight local cuisine, definition and evaluation of a destination through its restaurants and local food variety and quality, and its impact on a destination’s brand image. Food, and particularly specific branded food stuffs, might fulfil both physiological and social needs of consumers. But, of course, as shown above, the extensive value-added potentially included in territorial branding adds substantially to the opportunities for its elaboration. Due to the complexity of issues covered by the strategy many spheres of knowledge and preparational tools have to be explored and learnt at local level, including management licensing, skills development and educational programmes, place and particular mountain specificity, and systems of quality control. An insightful case of long-term exploration and promoting of local food potential and labelling strength is provided through the West Cork Festival in Ireland (Cork County Council 2019) that organizes regularly encounters of producers and consumers to convey multiple aspects of local food specificity in their region.

Examples of territorial branding of cheese products in mountain regions of Europe

Providing the opportunity for labelling “mountain products” as original products from mountain regions has added a direct branding scheme available for mountain areas to engage in territorial branding. The up-take of that facility, of course, takes time as preparations and



acquaintance to such strategies have to be realized, understood and turned into an activity of local actors. The survey on the implementation status reveals a steady increase in interest for that possibility (Euromontana 2020).

In this respect, it should be mentioned that many actors conceived similar approaches long before that official European branding, using either private labelling strategies or policy programmes linked to mountain, preservation status or other linkages to resource-based action highlighting qualitative products, processing or traditional ways of food development in mountain areas. For example, the UNESCO Man and Biosphere programme started already in 1971 can be taken as a strong reference here as more than 60% of the more than 900 global “Biosphere Reserves” are located in mountain regions, with many of them including territorial branding action as a significant priority action (Reed and Price 2020). There is an important overlap with local development activities. In Europe many LAGs of the LEADER programme situated in mountain regions make use of such options (e.g. LAG Asterousia in Greece, or LAG Lungau in Austria, and many more). The thrust of these numerous examples points to a redirection towards enhancing aspects of authenticity and sustainable mountain tourism development as core action fields.

A recent overview on the use of geographical indications of ingredients across the EU reveals that place branding of agricultural products is concentrated on a few types of products. Besides the most elaborated labels of wine products, these include the following product categories: fruit and vegetables and cereal products, cheeses, fresh meat, oils and fat, other meat products, and some bakery products. Out of the selected case studies more than 20% were cheeses underscoring the distribution and wide range of application of geographical indications from cheeses in European regions (AREPO 2021). Drawing from the diverse examples of territorial brands of cheeses presented one example on a mountain cheese from France might be particularly useful. The information provided on the raw milk cheese from Comté PDO in France is summarized in the annex (as a quote from the report by AREPO 2021, pp.39f.)

Austria does not have a strong tradition on elaborating labelling based on geographical indications. However, the list of the 14 PDOs approved for Austrian agricultural products reveal that 6 out of them are on regional specificities of cheese production (Buchinger et al. 2012), one of them in the area where the study trip for the LAG Mestia to Austria is planned to go (i.e. “Gailtaler alp cheese”). Most of these territorial brands focus on a traditional type of local cheese production with local specific processing schemes, regulations and typical sensory characteristics. The scope for intensifying territorial brands of agricultural products, and particularly for developing mountain products, was explored in a case study in Austria (Groier et al. 2012) for the EU study led by the JRC (Santini et al 2013). Obviously, cheese production was a particular focus in that study. It discusses the wide range of branding terms relating to mountain origin, going far beyond the official EU labelling system of Geographical Indications (PDO/PGI and TSG) and addresses consumer awareness and perceptions of labelling trends. In the context of highly developed markets it is also crucial to assess the threats of misleading designations, authenticity issues and interrelations to value chains and market organization structures.

The Austrian study defines “mountain cheese” through the following two content-related aspects (Groier et al. 2012, 42):



- Primarily it is conceived as a denomination for a special type of cheese with a particular recipe and quality appearance as defined in the Austrian “Codex Alimentarius” (in its chapter on “hard cheese”), the EU-Protected Designation regulation (PDO) for “Vorarlberger or Tyrolean Mountain Cheese” or in the registration documents of the three respective “Regions of delight” (another dedicated national labelling scheme in Austria) referring to mountain cheese production.
- Secondly, it acts as a regional designation for cheese traditionally coming from mountain areas.

As the Austrian “Codex Alimentarius” just defines “mountain cheese” as products to be originating from Austria, and regulating raw materials and recipe to be used, theoretically it might also be produced by non-mountain farmers or from non-mountain milk. The report is conscious of these misleading gaps in regulation. Nevertheless, the detailed regional survey among the main retailers in Austria found 68 different products claiming “mountain cheese” origin through specific labelling of their products. It underlines the host of diverse products available and the need for clarifying rules and origin to raise consumer confidence in product quality and origin.

Case 1: Cheese Route Bregenzerwald

The Cheese Route Bregenzerwald is an association of farmers, local dairy, tradesmen and commercial enterprises from the Bregenzerwald, a region in the most western part of Austria starting in the period LEADER II and still active. The members and partners of the Cheese Route Bregenzerwald contribute to the cultivation of the landscape, to maintain the small structures in agriculture and to promote high-quality products of the region of Bregenzerwald. The main achievements of the project are:

Installing an Alpine and mountain cheese cellar for the maturation and maintenance of more

- * than 32,000 loaves of cheese,
- * production of about 30 different types of cheeses,
- * largest sales consortium in a rural region of Europe,
- * involvement of large set of users (alpine dairies, restaurant owners, tourism, museums, etc.)
- * creation of new market opportunities for protected origin product quality silage-free raw milk.

Further activities are services and trainings like product tasting on farms, a ‘dairy school’ on pastures, visits of cheese cellars and alpine pastures with milk production and elaboration of online shop facilities.

Building on the local products tourism activities are promoted and hiking experiences in the mountain landscapes of the region are specifically linking tradition, pastures and landscapes and sensory experiences of the area. This lends itself to a wide scope of international promotion and promotion of “authentic” tourism experience (Burson 2020).

Source: <http://www.kaesestrasse.at> (quoted from Oedl-Wieser and Dax 2018)

In general, requirements for PDO and other types of mountain cheese from Austrian production regulate the origin of mountain milk and processing of raw haymilk as a condition for approving the respective labels. In several cases the regional designation of mountain cheese (e.g. for Zillertaler, Bregenzerwälder Mountain Cheese) is more popular and hence more generally



used than PDO labels as the regional brand provides a better marketing instrument for region-specific quality and image. In other case, the term Mountain Cheese is even replaced by more telling terms like for “Walserstolz” (Walsers’proud) or “Bergrebell” (mountain rebel) attributing greater strengths in that specific label to the product.

The region of Vorarlberg also provides the most elaborated example of a combination of a product’s territorial labelling and local development activities based on that product (see Box, above). The following box describes some of the core characteristics and relates to the long-term evolution of activities of other non-agricultural actors within the region. The established intra-regional network of actors from diverse economic branches and sectors underpins the high appeal of the territorial brand’s label and its attraction as a regional development focal point.

Other important and particularly valuable examples of advancing territorial brands (including cheese production) in the mountain areas of Europe are the Alpine Space’s discussions of “territorial branding” within recent workshops, primarily led by the region of Val Poschiavo. The last conference in October 2021 highlighted the impact of the COVID-crisis and explored options for making use of this specific situation for reassessing the opportunities for territorial labelling in mountain areas. Deliberations focused on “rethinking the preservation of natural and cultural diversities and heritages as founding elements of socio-ecological resilience” (Origine, Diversité et Territoires 2021). Considerations also explored the reconceptualization of the role of formal and informal economies, with a particular role for consumers and their socio-environmental responsibilities.

A framework for “branding” activities in cheese production by LAG Mestia

The structure of the LDS of LAG Mestia points to the five thematic policy fields and, implicitly, relates to their interrelatedness to instigate local initiatives, respectively to raise effects of actions. This provides a clear and meaningful structure for activities throughout the LEADER implementation period. In terms of understanding and favouring also the interactions of different lines of activity it might be sensible to highlight the rising interactions and multi-dimensional aspects of many sector activities. Even if that makes preparation of activities more complex, it seems important to relate to these aspects as they might be very impactful in the long run. For example, action for agricultural and forest land use and improvement of management structures and production has direct implication for mitigating land abandonment threats in this high mountain context. Contributing to cultural landscapes of the area is closely interlinked with local quality of life, attractiveness of the area and shaping tourism destination management. Particularly for all types of „territorial branding“ approaches such a view might be fundamental. Focusing on the commitment to advance quality of cheese production and consider labelling concepts for the local, highly valuable cheese products might present a very useful entry point to raise the recognition of local products and shed light on local specific food.

Branding is viewed as an important issue in implementation considerations of local action, orientating activities to nurture local assets, in particular focusing on specific local products. These activities have to be based on the outline of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) of the LAG. As LAG discussions focused on cheese production in its traditional way of Upper Svaneti to retain its local specificity and elaborate a territorial branding approach the following remarks should highlight relevant aspects. These will point to ideas for place-based activities



and perspectives, to link to inspirational sources and how such a local development process might address and make use of opportunities for “territorial branding” approaches. In particular, the following considerations on labelling aspects for cheese production relate to the geographical context of high mountain areas and specific conclusions for selecting and designing mountain-related unique branding activities. They are partly based on findings from a very recently published evaluation study of the adoption of “geographical indications and traditional specialities guaranteed protected in the EU” (EC 2021). Though this assessment is not specifically on mountain regions’ products some relevant aspects might be derived and useful for the LAG Mestia. In this regard issues of other mountain products related studies on territorial branding (e.g. Santini et al. 2013) are included as well:

- Geographical delimitation of mountain areas, as core reference point for product origin;
- Local/regional origin, encompassing notions of spatial “identity”, cultural (and natural) heritage and common production conditions, enabling specific product’s qualities;
- Making use of cultural narratives for place branding, e.g. by addressing protection areas status, landscape shaping processes, including also approaches like Biosphere Reserves, seeking an integration of protection and socio-economic regional development;
- Addressing explicitly traditional, local knowledge, procedures of cheese making derived from mountain contexts and climate conditions, and recipes linked to territorial branded products;
- Community of (often rather small) group of producers in a small local area, sharing socio-cultural practices and knowledge on product origin and processing;
- Involve producer groups in preparation of territorial branding approaches;
- Relate to sensory experiences, quality approval and recipe based on specific products, aiming at safeguarding traditional methods of production of mountain areas;
- Linking product qualities to type of vegetation found in high mountain areas, and particularly in local context, serving as animal’ staple diet, and specific method of production;
- Linkage of territorial brand to mountain specificities, culture and history of land management system in the area;
- Overcoming challenging simplicity in place branding by addressing the foundational aspects (of product origin), spatial implications of remote areas (linking mountain areas to markets, on the spot or domestic or international), processing obstacles (due to fragmentation and limited scale of production), and marketing issues;
- Achieve calculation of production, processing and marketing activities in such a way that reasonable production and labelling cost is achieved to secure fair return for involved farmers and producers, including considerations of distribution of benefits along the value chain;
- Use of swiftly emerging digital techniques to support evolution, preparation of market and as a means to tap into evolving market potential;



- Analysis of social, ecologic and spatial implications of labelling activities;
- Explore integration in value chains and regional (and national) trade structures;
- Explore impact on rural economy and up- and downstream relevance;
- Explore relation to existing (agricultural) policy and support of local development, to assess scope for enabling preparation and community assessment of branding strategy;
- Assess potential of rural development measures, regulations and promotion policies as well as marketing schemes and strategies to support elaboration, official branding decisions and implementation of territorial branding actions (of mountain area);
- Highlight the importance of clear and reliable information to consumers;
- Need to simplify and realize the registration process;
- Need for prioritizing sustainability concerns and environmental standards in future frameworks;
- Protection of intellectual property rights;
- Implementation of adapted administrative national control scheme;
- Include assessment on land management scenarios and future shifts due to territorial label activities;
- Include sustainable mountain tourism pathways and integration of territorial branding products into those strategies.

With regard to the short remaining period of LAG Mestia in this first implementation period a focus on product elaboration and nurturing visibility of product's quality seems pivotal. The emphasis might thus be on clarifying the existing quality of the local cheese, elaborating a set of criteria that highlights its spatial uniqueness, sensory values and experience, recipes and traditional knowledge on production linked to soil and herbs on pastures, as well as processing specialities. This would include processing plants facilities, scope of production and size, collaboration of farmers and cooperation in diverse stages of the value chain. Moreover, linkages to other local sectors that could derive added value and recognition of the branded products should be explored for a future more comprehensive local network of activities.

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Annex:

COMTÉ PDO

BOX 5

Comté PDO is a raw milk cheese with a cooked and pressed paste. It is produced in France in the mountainous region of the Massif du Jura, situated mainly in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté. Registered as a PDO in 1996, its production dates back to the 13th century. It is the first PDO cheese per production in France (for more information, [consult Comté website](#)).

Comté's reputation is long standing and reaches as well international markets and consumers. As a result, the PDO has been widely used as an ingredient in processed products. In fact, over the years the *Comité Interprofessionnel de Gruyère et de Comté* (CIGC) has collaborated with many companies and it has also took part in legal suits for the misuse of its PDO as an ingredient. That is the reason why the CIGC considered essential to define strict criteria for processors wanting to mention the PDO name in the commercial designation of a processed or compound product, in order to protect its reputation.

In particular, in line with the European Commission guidelines and INAO guidelines, the CIGC demands to comply with the following criteria:

1. Comté, processed in its raw state, should be the only cheese ingredient of the processed or compound product: no comparable ingredients are allowed;
2. The expression to be used in the commercial denomination of the processed or compound product is "au Comté" (with Comté);
3. The percentage of Comté used as raw ingredient should be indicated just after the name Comté (or Comté PDO);
4. The size of the word "Comté" should be less than 2/3 of the largest characters on the packaging;
5. The name Comté cannot be used in the commercial designation of food additives and industrial intermediates (ex. powder, frozen, extruded, melted, flavouring, etc...). Furthermore, it cannot be used in the commercial designation of ready-made meals that incorporate food additives and industrial intermediates;
6. The label and packaging of the processed or compound product containing Comté PDO as ingredient cannot reproduce Comté's logo nor the official EU PDO logo. Nevertheless, they may include an image of Comté (whole or cut) with its visible label containing the PDO logo as well as Comté logo (see [example showcased in figure 17](#)). In order to avoid miscommunication, close-up pictures showing the PDO logo as well as Comté logo are not allowed.

In 2011 and 2013, McDonald created a special menu called "Grandes Envies de Fromage" in collaboration with several GI producer groups, among other the CIGC. For this purpose, McDonald and the CIGC stipulated a partnership agreement in order to clearly define the quantity of Comté to be used in the burger, as well as labelling rules to mention the PDO on the packaging, presentation and advertising of the final product.

Comté PDO was the only cheese present in the burger and represented around 10% of the total weight of the final product, with a 25-gram slice plus 5 grams of sauce¹¹. Every step from communication to the final packaging was defined in strict collaboration with the CIGC, in order to respect all its conditions. For the CIGC this was an efficient strategy to attract young consumers and access a new market outlet.

On a completely different note, in 2013, Pizza Topco (the exclusive master franchise of Pizza Hut Delivery in France) produced five different pizzas called "Sensation Comté" and containing a mix of different cheeses. Among the other, Comté PDO represented a variable percentage of the total weight of the cheeses used as ingredients, ranging from 20.91% to 67.05%. At first, the CIGC informed Pizza Topco with a formal written communication that in order to mention Comté on the packaging, presentation and advertising of the pizzas, the PDO should have been the only cheese used as ingredient.

The company refused to comply with that rule, so the CIGC brought proceedings before the Tribunal de Grande Instance of Paris with the support of the INAO. On February 28th 2017, the Paris Court of Appeal confirmed the judgment handed down in 2015 by the Paris Tribunal de Grande Instance. In particular, the Court of Appeal recalled that the use of a PDO name on the advertising of a compound product containing the PDO as ingredient should



comply with strict rules. Namely, the processed product should not contain any other 'comparable ingredient' and the GI should be a characterising ingredient of the final product.

Since it could not be demonstrated that Comté attributed an essential characteristic to the final product and due to the mix with other cheeses, the Court of Appeal ruled that Pizza Topco did not have the right to use the name of the PDO when advertising its pizzas. Pizza Topco committed a fault, by misappropriating and weakening the reputation of the PDO Comté. The company was thus condemned to pay 150.000 euros to the INAO and the CIGC as a compensation for the damage suffered.

Pizza Topco case shows how in the absence of EU and national binding legislation, GI producer groups do not have the tools to control processors. They do not have to authorise processors (McDonald's case is an exception based on the good will of the multinational), so they rely on the good will of processing companies and on ex-post controls, which are very expensive and therefore cannot be held systematically, but only as spot checks.

Based on these past experiences, the CIGC considers fundamental to increase the level of protection of the PDO when used as ingredient, by codifying formally the criteria described above in the product specifications. Thus, in 2019 the CIGC has requested a revision of Comté's product specifications³², which is currently under examination by INAO. If this modification were to be approved, it will have a considerable impact, since the transformers and processors will be obliged to follow the rules set in the specifications, and they will be subject to Comté control system, as the producers. This strategy could disincentives processors wanting to use the PDO as ingredient, with a loss of opportunities for the Comté producers. Nevertheless, the CIGC has weighted this possibility and chose to address the bigger risk of misuse and evocation.

Furthermore, as a member of the *Conseil national des appellations d'origine laitières* (CNAOL), the CIGC is discussing with other members the possibility to build up a cooperative monitoring and control system to check the correct use of the PDO cheeses as ingredient, among other things. This would give the possibility to monitor more systematically processed products, while sharing the cost of the surveillance activity.

Those practices aim to strengthen the CIGC competences concerning the protection of the PDO against any misuse or evocation.



Figure 17 Quenelles made with Comté AOP.

Source: <https://catalysage.oxbank-alliance.com/produit/quenelles-au-comte%3%A9-x-4> (consulted on 28/04/21)