



Opinion

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EU Quality Schemes for Agricultural Products and Foodstuffs: Using an Action-Oriented Research



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Opinion

Quality schemes for identification and protection of the names of those agricultural products and foodstuffs that have specific quality characteristics were introduced by the European Union (EU) already in 1992 as part of its complex agricultural product quality policy [1]. They aim to provide benefits for producers and guarantees for consumers in all the EU Member States. Currently, four major schemes are in place: Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) (both introduced in 1992), Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG) (approved in 2006 and amended in 2012) and the EU organic logo (ECO) [2]. Geographical indications (PDO, PGI) and TGS aim to promote and protect products with a geographical origin or specific traditional aspect. They have become the leading intellectual property instruments used in the markets to attribute cultural value to products and to commodify the links between food characteristics and their place of origin or farming method [3]. In practice, the system contributes to the marketing of cultural heritage [4]. The latest quality scheme is the TSG, approved in 2006 and amended in 2012. Over the 2011-2017 period, 3,153 geographical indications (including Geographical indication of spirit drinks and aromatized wines) and 54 TSGs were registered in the EU-28. The estimated sales of geographical indications for agricultural products and foodstuffs in 2017 amounted to EUR 27 billion and TSGs to EUR 2.3 billion [5]. Interest in registering TSGs is, in contrast to geographical indications, very modest. One reason might be that the TSG is not included in the WIPO Paris Convention nor the WTO TROPS agreement. Thus, the protective power and benefits of the TSG remain weak compared to the other geographical indications.

A unique label, "Euro-leaf", indicates products originating from organic farms (ECO). In the EU, the organic / processed food market falls under implementing rules laying down organic production, certification, and labelling principles. From July 2012, all packaged organic products produced in the EU must use a

new EU logo [6]. The new logo is compulsory for the labelling and advertising of organic pre-packaged food products, placed on the EU market, making it easier for consumers to identify organic products in all EU Member States. In addition, there are also voluntary eco-labelling schemes in the EU, but the question is whether they bring any additional benefits [7]. The literature reports that over-labelling and information congestion can lead to consumer confusion [8], hindering greater sales of organic products. The consumer confusion can be mitigated if each logo is clearly targeted to a specific market segment and properly highlighted with crucial information [9]. Voluntary eco-labels have a long tradition in Europe, and some enjoy a high level of visibility. In addition, the requirements for some organic labels go beyond EU requirements. These labels can provide market differentiation if consumers understand the differences between them.

So far, many activities have been carried out, and much effort has already been invested in promoting quality schemes and their products in the EU. They have brought countless achievements in greater information, awareness, and trust in quality schemes and protected products. However, incentives are still limited; there exists confusion in recognizing labels by consumers and producers. Currently, primary producers have only little interest in joining food supply chains or are dissatisfied with purchase prices and, generally, attitudes towards them. However, the economic theory shows that the registration of protected products provides a greater ability for producers to compete in the market [10]. The growing number of registrations [5] confirms manufacturers' increasing interest in using quality schemes to create a competitive advantage. At present, there remains much room to increase the number of products' registrations and purchases of products from quality schemes. Such products, as a rule, have a higher price compared to standard products because their production requires compliance with a particular specification that can lead

to additional costs. Certified manufacturers offer high-quality products and therefore have greater market opportunities while facing certain external and internal challenges and the need to develop their production and marketing skills [1] continually.

To address the problems of the weak competitive position of the agricultural products and foodstuffs' producers and sub-optimally informed consumers effectively, we argue that future research should be more action-oriented. We propose applying the existing theory on agri-food quality schemes and modifying it over time by the involvement of stakeholders in the research process. The aim is to improve the welfare of consumers and the economic situation of producers. For this purpose, we need to gather information related to current issues of the confusion in the visibility of labels (i.e., how to attract consumers' attention to buy such products). Moreover, we also need to gather information on how to attract primary producers and food processors to include their products in quality schemes, acquaint them with the system's benefits, and link them and traders into organizationally efficient agri-food chains. By direct involvement of all the relevant stakeholders in the research, the consumers' perspective on the visibility of labels and producers' vision of quality schemes benefits would bridge the theory and practice. The action-oriented research is based on deliberate, exploratory and collaborative methods [11], such as workshops, focus groups, interviews, A/B split tests etc. Participants in research must be buyers of products from quality schemes as well as those who do not buy these products, and among producers – the certified and non-certified producers as well.

Active collaboration of academia, practice and community in action-oriented research is proved to be effective in various fields [12]. To our knowledge, there is currently no action-oriented research in the field of agri-food qualitative schemes. However, some research has been conducted in the wider area of food supply. An example of good practice is the Italian project developing a circular ecosystem to collect and redistribute food surpluses to the needy and local community. The project directly involved 60 diverse actors, such as non-profit organizations, public sector, retail food companies and researchers. The result is over 160 tons of food collected and redistributed to the needy. Moreover, the experiment confirmed the success of the model of participative governance [13].

In general, the collaborative process produces scientifically and socially relevant knowledge and transformative actions [14]. We believe that practical solutions on the issues of marketing and promotion of products from quality schemes by learning from the experiences of consumers and producers are much

needed. Support to foster efficient transition through testing and demonstrating is required. In this way, the engaging and relevant actors in academia, producers, local governments, and consumers will co-produce a shared vision and approach to bring about the benefits of food quality schemes.

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