

# Labelling origin food product: towards sustainable rural development?

## SUMMARY

This research project focuses on the study (exploration, explanation, and comparison) of two contrasting food labelling strategies, and their contribution to the sustainable development of the territory. They are, first, the strategy that centres on the protection of a specific products (such as Protected Designation of Origin), and secondly, the strategy that aims at protecting a territorial community (regional label). Both labels are grounded in local and collective action, but there are many differences between them. Whilst PDOs are strongly institutionalised labels, regional labels are open models; associated with this there are different degrees of flexibility and rigidity.

On the theoretical level this project helps to explore state-farmers relation, in the first place because it illustrates how existing institutional frameworks impact upon the development of labelling strategies, and secondly, it shows how these relations might be changed through constructivist actions. The concept of sustainability within rural communities is also approached, because this project analyses the contribution of these new institutional frameworks to the sustainable development of the territory. This research also contributes to the understanding of origin food labels. We will address the different tendencies within the EU, where southern countries have a tendency towards the first strategy and northern countries towards the second one. Central in the methodology of the proposed research are the interface analysis (Long, 1989) and the actor oriented approach (Long, 2001).

## INTRODUCTION

This project aims at studying two contrasting origin food labelling strategies and their contribution to the sustainable development of the territory. In this part of the project we will review existing literature concerning the problem of sustainable rural development and origin food labels.

### *Defining Rural and Sustainable Development*

Rural development is a highly controversial and contested concept, so we will defend the easy but complex idea of rural development as the development of the rural (Ploeg and Marsden, 2008). The problem goes back to the old question of “what is the rural?” There are many different ways to approach this question, but not all of them provide a definition that will help us to accomplish the later task of understanding the contribution of origin food labels to the sustainable development of the territory. They often reduce the question of the rural to dichotomies (such as folk-urban (Redfield, 1947)), numbers (OECD, 2008, 2009) or discourses (Halfacree, 1993, 1999; Jones, 1999; Woods, 1997), and none of these definitions would help to understand a problem related to sustainable development that requires the analysis of interactions, interrelations, transitions and tendencies. To recognize the rural we need a dynamic approach. Hence, this project defines rural as “a place where the ongoing encounter, interaction and mutual transformation of man and the living nature is located” (Ploeg and Marsden, 2008).

This definition of “rural” underlines two important elements: society and living nature. These two elements and their interrelations are the key for the idea of sustainable development. Following the framework proposed by van der Ploeg (1997, 2003), society and living nature interact in particular forms (Marsden et al, 2001). The contribution of these labels to these particular forms of interaction is the central question that our research will try to answer. Later, taking into account that contribution, we will define them as sustainable rural development practices. Two concepts are important to analyse that contribution: *co-production* and *co-evolution* (Ploeg, 1997).

*Co-production* concerns the ongoing interaction and mutual change of human and living nature (Ploeg, 2008). It is the process where “living nature is used, reproduced and transformed into a rich variety of often highly contrasting expressions” (Marsden and Ploeg, 2008). Existing practices of rural economy, like farming, forestry, agro-tourism, hunting, cheese making, etc, are expressions of co-production. It is expected that the social and the living nature co-evolved in a “specific, and often mutually reinforcing, way” (*Ibid*). However, some practices may change this co-evolution, and subdue living nature to society in such a way that the cycle of co-production is broken. This has been the case in the agro-industrial model in the last decades. The implementation of this model has changed the co-production and co-evolution of nature and society, disconnecting agriculture from the living nature (Ploeg, 2003).

Therefore, this project defines sustainable rural development as those practices and dynamics that preserve and enhance co-production (the ongoing encounter, interaction and mutual transformation) and co-evolution of man and living nature in a given place (Ploeg and Marsden, 2008).

#### *Sustainability: multi-level, multi-dimensional*

This project links the question of sustainability with origin food labelling strategies, which means that we will study how local actors are changing their context through these new institutional agreements that are the labels. Following the explained framework of co-production and co-evolution, special attention should be paid to the change of the interrelations of man and living nature. According to van der Ploeg, “a successful co-production feeds back into the needed reproduction (and further development) of the resource base [...] and the survival, standard of living and improved prospect of the families involved” (2008: 26). Therefore, understanding sustainability as multidimensional, we will study the effects on population (economic, social and cultural) and territory (environmental), at micro (farm level), meso (defined territory) and macro levels (global). We will create a set of indicators taking as reference these dimensions and levels in relation with the concept of embeddedness.

#### *Labelling strategies within the agro-food system*

This research follows Long’s perspective on local-global dynamics. According to Long, local dynamics can be transformed by becoming part of wider global processes, whereas global dynamics can be understood focusing on local conditions, strategies and actors (1996:47). It means that the increase in labelling strategies such as PDOs (Tregear *et al.*, 2007) is strongly related to the need for new agreements within the agro-food system. Here, a new social discourse can be identified, which mixes a set of values -such as environmental concerns, food safety and health care-, that breaks down previous reductionisms. These new values are integrated with the image of local products. This merger materializes under different labels such as *traditional*, *natural*, *organic*, etc, (Bérard and Marchenay, 2004).

The role of origin food label in this context is related to the transition from mass-production and mass-consumption economy to a new value economy (Aguilar and Bueno, 2003). This new economy -unfolded in post-industrial societies- is characterized by small size business, flexible specialization, continuous innovation, and adaptability to new tendencies and tastes. Old models of mass production – such as *fordism* and *taylorism*- started to show up deficiencies in the 70s as a result of their rigidities. These models were neither able to adapt themselves to the multiple opening markets, nor to the continuous changes on customers’

demands. In our opinion, this change affects the viability of industrial farming model, which is not only economically unsustainable in Europe due to the growing squeeze on agriculture (Ploeg *et al.*, 2000), but also unable to fulfil new patterns of consumption.

Consequently, it is possible to appreciate why in such a context -deeply influenced by the loss of reference due to globalization- there has been an increase of local food demand. Nowadays, consumers are willing to buy food that comes from specific eco-systems, produced by local *know-how*, embedded in history, etc. These products suit consumers' needs of rooting and territorial anchoring. Their consumption -in consonance with the "experiential marketing" guidelines (Schmitt, 1999) - evokes feelings and sensations linked with nostalgic images of spaces which values are in opposition to the urban world. In this context, origin food labels are devices that enlarge *trust*, because they make traceability possible for consumers.

#### *Conceptualising Labelling strategies: the importance of the focal point*

There are different ways to approach labelling strategies. This project focuses on origin food labels, so we will approach them as new *institutional agreements*, new rules for the game between the different actors involved in producing, processing and consuming the labelled products. This means that the process of setting these new rules is an exercise of (1) re-thinking and (2) re-design the reality where the product is embedded. This reality includes mankind, living nature and their co-evolution.

This project works with two categories of origin food label strategies: product and community oriented. The first category consists of those labels which try to preserve specific products or processes. The usual example are Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) or Traditional Speciality Guarantee (TSG). Community oriented labels try to preserve a specific territory and community, for instance regional labels. Although both categories are local and collective initiatives, their creation parts from different focal point, and our hypothesis is that the outcome will be different. In the first case, the product and the practices around it become the objective of protection, so the new agreements will re-shape the co-production, and later the co-evolution in order to privilege this product. In the second case, the territory and the community become the object of preservation, so the new agreements will try to re-shape the co-production, and later co-evolution in order to preserve the community and territory.

### *Labelling strategies and institutional culture*

In the last decade much has been written about the relationship between local food production and rural development (Brunori and Rosi, 2000; Marsden *et al.*, 2000; Murdoch *et al.*, 2000; Hinrichs, 2003; Tregear *et al.*, 2007), but, as yet, hardly anything has been elaborated about the contrasting tendencies within the EU, where southern countries have a strong tradition of product oriented labelling, and northern countries seem to follow a community oriented tendency. In analysing the backgrounds of these contrasting patterns, this research will use the concept of *Institutional Culture*, which Börzel describes as a 'collective understanding that determines the dominant strategy of domestic actors by which they respond to adaptation pressure' (Cowles *et al.*, 2001: 138). In this sense, and regarding the food label question, we assume that existing tendencies maybe related to previous collective understandings

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Nowadays, **we are still far away from understanding how local actors and institutions respond to contradictory global contexts through their daily practices and interactions.** This project identifies the creation of new origin food labels as one of these practices. Our research will focus on origin food labels that are the outcomes of collective actions, analyzing their contribution to the sustainable development of their region. This project raises a second issue within the origin food labelling strategies, namely the different focus of their protection. We have divided these strategies between the ones which main objective is to preserve specific products, and those that aim at protecting a territorially based community. This research will take two cases of origin food labels that have been functioning for more than 15 years as main reference to approach the problem: *PDO Aceite de Oliva Virgen Extra de la Sierra de Cádiz* and *Wadden Goud*.

More specifically, the objective of this research is:

- **First, to study how local actors create origin food labels as a response to the globalised agro-food system; secondly, to analyze the contribution of these labels to the sustainable development of the region; and thirdly to research how local institutional context affects and is influenced by these processes.**

The research objectives will be guided by the following six research questions:

- a) **How do local actors and labels construct room for manoeuvre to unfold their own interests and projects? Are new markets created?**

- b) How does local institutional context and culture affect local actors in labelling processes?
- c) What differences can be found between both institutional contexts in terms of practices and collective understandings?
- d) How do origin food labelling strategies interact with the other initiatives in the area?
- e) What differences and similarities can be found between certified and non-certified products in the same area?
- f) How do these institutional agreements affect the co-production and co-evolution of their territories? What differences can be found between community and product oriented labelling strategies?

## METHODOLOGY

This project combines traditions of social anthropology and rural sociology. Therefore, an interdisciplinary methodology will be implemented. This research follows a case study strategy with an interpretative perspective and an actor-oriented approach. Qualitative and quantitative data will be collected during fieldwork periods, and they will be analysed following the *Grounded Theory* approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2002), which implies the continuous comparison between data collected in the observational units. This project is aware of the language difficulties that participative observation and fieldwork in Friesland may raise. So, a special budget for fieldwork assistant has been approved. A research assistant will be contacted through the WSSFS, the Friesian student society of Wageningen University. This strategy supports the ethnographic purpose of this project and the necessary *thick description* (Geertz, 1977) of the interface (Long, 1989) that will characterise the description of results.

### *The Case studies*

Two rural development areas have been selected as appropriate observational units: **Friesland** (The Netherlands) and **Sierra de Cádiz** (Spain). Sierra de Cádiz is located at the north-west of Cadiz province, Friesland in the North of the Netherlands. The selection of these observational units follows criteria of contrasting and sharing positions:

- Typology of rural region.
- Importance of labelling strategies
- Contrasting institutional contexts
- Contrasting labels strategies

North-West Friesland and Sierra de Cádiz are defined by the OECD as **intermediate rural areas** (2008, 2009), and they are involved in a similar position within their national and regional context. However, we find this definition reductionist. Taking into account the history and context of both areas and the framework that we are using, we will define them as **specialised agricultural area** (Ploeg and Marsden, 2008). In both areas local actors use **labelling strategies as important instruments**. In Sierra de Cádiz, it is the usual instrument of the Local Action Group. They created the association that at the beginning of the 90s started with the project of achieving the label. Indeed, the manager of the LAG is still the president of the PDO. Currently the LAG is involved in a new project which aims at achieving two new PDOs for the area (goat cheese and sheep cheese), and also has programs to support local entrepreneurs to achieve labels as ISO 9000. In the case of Friesland, the Wadden Group Foundation is one of the active actors in the area related to rural development. They were founded at the beginning of the 90s, and one of the main instruments that they have used is the creation of labels like *Wadden Goud*.

However, the selection of both observational units is also related to the strong contrast that can be observed between them in other domains. In Andalusia, rural development practices are the outcomes of strongly institutionalized processes (Aguilar, 2009), whilst in Friesland they are the results of a strong process of negotiation, where civil society has an important role and organizes itself around territorial and environmental cooperatives such as Northern Frisian Woodlands (Renting and Ploeg, 2001). Therefore, the **local institutional context is highly contrasting** in both areas; Sierra de Cádiz represents a paradigmatic case of institutional thickness (Amin and Thirft, 1995), whereas the institutional context of Friesland is characterized by high density but low institutional thickness. In the same way, PDO and regional labels are also considered as **contrasting origin food labels**, the first is product oriented label and is strongly pre-defined strategies, whilst Wadden Goud is a community oriented and quiet flexible model. It could be said that in the first case local actors have to follow an existing recipe to prepare the dish, but in the second case they have to decide also the recipe.

In order to achieve our objective we will follow these steps:

1. Policies and legal frameworks analysis;
2. Local actors and networks mapping;
3. Local actors interviews and participant observation;
4. Ethnography of the life cycles of products;
5. Final analysis of the data collected.

### 1) Policies and legal framework analysis

During this step we will compile all the available information about the policies and laws that affect the practices of both cases in order to understand their context. We will collect this information from the available literature and previous research projects; later it will be categorized according to their venue (municipal, regional, national and European) and issues (health, hygiene, nature management, food production...). This step will provide data to partly answer the second and third research questions.

### 2) Local actors and networks mapping

Once the policies and legislation framing of the local actors has been analyzed and understood, the identification and mapping of local actors will take place. This mapping process will focus on the predefined area, and will seek to find similar products for later comparison. The objective of this step is to get to know the network unfolded by the initiative and actors involved in the processes. This step will consist of a double classification, first the initiative itself, and later the actors within them. Initiatives will be categorised according to the orientation (product or community); and the actors will be grouped by function and relationship within the initiatives (producers, managers, retailers...). Through the physical mapping and categorisation we expect to raise new questions about participation of local actors in the labels. This step will produce data needed to answer the questions c, d and e.

### 3) Local actors interviews and participant observation

Using the previously identified categories, semi-structured interviews and group discussion will be conducted. These interviews will be made with actors directly and indirectly involved in the labels. The interviews will focus on their views and experiences concerning the labels, the process and history of the label, and any change that they had to implement because of the label. Group discussion will follow double dynamic concerning local actors' categories: homogenous and heterogeneous. These discussion groups will center on the concept of sustainability and the changes implemented in this sense. Participant observations at the interface will be another important part of this stage, using formal meetings as assembly, and public events as farm markets or fairs. This step will be very important to answer the six research questions.

### 4) Ethnography of the life cycles of products.

Once the analysis of both labels has been completed, one specific product will be chosen from each, and later will be compared with a similar product from the area not included in the initiative. This step will be considered as ethnography of food that will follow the life cycle of a



selected product. This will help us to understand the networks and actors involved in the food-system from a different perspective, and we will be able to explore how both labels shape the interaction between man and nature. This ethnography will provide data to answer the questions a, e, and f.

#### 5) Final analysis of the data collected

This will be the final stage. Following the framework of this project that understands sustainable rural development as those practices and dynamics that preserve and enhance co-production (the ongoing encounter, interaction and mutual transformation) and co-evolution of man and living nature in a given place, we will analyse the changes introduced by this institutional agreement in both areas through the set of indicators previously designed.

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