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Involving Farmers in Institutionalization Procedures The Case of AOC Unions

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Abstract

Once a local product is awarded protection under an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) certification, it may be considered as a local resource that must be managed. In the AOC unions, viewed here as an action system, farmers are often at a disadvantage. In our two case studies on AOC cheeses, a systems approach was applied to rehabilitate the farmers' production systems by giving a status to their practices. The aim was to help them overcome their fear of standardisation and their problems in developing co-operation with other professional branches. Finally, the researchers' role is analysed with reference to the institutional procedures for protecting typical products.

Introduction

Registered designation of origin (*Appellation d'Origine Protégée*/AOP) and designated geographic origin (*Indications Géographiques Protégées*/IGP) are the two ways by which local names attributed to food products may be protected. While protection under IGPs is of the "label" or collective brandmark type with an attached list of specifications to be met and standardised controls, AOPs are based on local usage and traditional practices. Management of AOP products is therefore under the direct responsibility of the "owners" of this product, both for the criteria to be considered and for agreement to be given or refused. Under these circumstances, it is vital that farmers should participate effectively and fully in the "*appellation*" union.

"Typical" food products are often named after their region of origin. We argue that they should be considered as a local resource that must be managed, since their reputation and the commercial interests at stake induce risks of imitation or undue geographic extension. This resource, which is shared in common by the producers, can only be managed by them, as is the case with AOCs. Our assumption is that typical products involved in AOC recognition and legal protection procedures become a collective property. As such they are directly linked with the sustainability of production systems from which they proceed and which they uphold. Protected products, therefore, raise questions of definition (regarding the links between the produce and the geographic area in which it is produced) and co-ordination between the parties involved in the procedure.

Two AOC situations concerning cheese products are described here. The AOC union is depicted as an action system (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977) in which actors do not all rank

equally. We then analyse how a systems approach helps give recognition to the livestock farmer's occupation. Last, the most significant results are discussed, i.e. helping the livestock farmers acquire the ability to co-operate with other, generally better organised professions.

The AOC union as an action system

An AOC system is obligatorily based on a formal or informal inter-professional group including the main operators of the sector, i.e. farmers who process their milk production, those who sell their milk to the dairy enterprises, co-operatives, artisanal and industrial cheese manufacturers and cheese refiners. An AOC system also mobilises buyers interested in these products, wholesalers and local or external retailers, and administrative bodies who supervise the whole system. These form a complex in which the parties involved have unequal positions regarding the procedure for protecting origin-designated products.

Behaviour diversity

Some unions such as the Beaufort cheese AOC display a simple structure: a federation of co-operatives and a few dairy farmers. Others such as the Corsican Brocciu union involve a highly differentiated sector. Generally, however, two poles dominate:

- some industrial and artisanal manufacturers used to competing with each other and who view themselves as sharing the same professional identity;

- a large number of widely scattered farmers who sell or process their milk and are so little organised that they do not understand they share common interests.

This imbalance creates major functional problems for an AOC union.

Recognition criteria for the AOC unions

The French National Institute of Designation of Origin (INAO) delegates to the AOC union several functions relative to definition, control and protection of the AOC product. For this, the union must meet three requirements:

- *representativeness*. The union must group producers who can be considered as the true "owners" of the AOC. This is totally independent of product quantity.

- *ability*. The union is assessed on its competence for periodically deciding on the admissibility of products applying for an AOC label with reference to a type whose permanence the union must guarantee.

- *effectivity*. The union's decisions or sanctions must be trustworthy (not suspect of partiality). The union is also responsible for protecting the product against imitation or usurpation.

Farmers have greater difficulties than industrialists in meeting these requirements.

Farmer handicaps

The union is usually organised in several bodies grouping agents from the same professional branch. Although the election of industrial representatives may pose some problems (competition rivalry), these are elected from the same body. In the case of farmer representatives, the procedure brings together people who know each other well but are not used to appointing a spokesman. Besides, those who process their own milk production form a distinct group from those selling their milk.

In addition, the production practices of farmers are an expression of the « traditional and unvarying local uses and methods » which fashion the authentic character of the AOC products. These practices, however, are poorly known, tacit, varied and produce non-uniform products. Finally, production conditions are often rudimentary with these farmers who do not have the financial means to support the burden of necessary investments required to standardise their processes and premises. They are often compelled to seek special dispensations from standards they cannot meet, so that their position is weakened in debates about control implementation.

A participatory systems approach

Diagnosing situations of conflict

By investigating actual on-farm production conditions in livestock and/or processing units, researchers are able to construct a model of system functioning. More than providing a mere description, the purpose is to understand the logic of the different parties to the AOC. With this *in situ* diagnosis, existing or potential conflicts of interests may be detected. It provides a picture of differing perceptions on critical points of definition and control.

* In the case of Beaufort cheese, there is general consensus within the union about the final product, although the ways of producing milk are highly diverse, which induces different perceptions as to the qualification criteria for the raw material. Milk payment grading becomes a source of potential conflict as a result.

* In the Brocciu situation, tensions have arisen between the farmers who process their milk and the industrial manufacturers about the commercial status of the product to be sold either as traditional fresh Brocciu on proximity markets, or specially packaged in order to extend the life span of the product and thus reach the export market.

References and rationales

Knowledge drawn from the diagnoses allows to target data production towards information that will highlight situations of potential conflict (Dubeuf, 1995). An experimental approach (analytical data or references external to the actors) is coupled with participatory procedures (modelling of situation diversity and strategic stakes). Models for action are thus elaborated which represent modes of reasoning that combine different types of knowledge. This modelling effort outlines a new space in which the parties involved may confront each other.

* In the Beaufort case, in-depth research led to characterising milks in relation with the different livestock systems they originate from.

* In the case of Brocciu, investigations focused on changes in the hygienic quality of products from farmers or industrial processors with and without packaging. The results led on to modelling microbial evolution and investigating acceptability thresholds.

Negotiation assistance

The researchers' role does not solely consist of providing information to the AOC parties; they also contribute to their appropriation. Besides, new questions arise in the process, inducing further research. The objective is to elaborate the conditions for *agreement* between the parties, especially on potential points of conflict. Reaching an agreement does not mean hitting a compromise (or a bargain) but proceeding on to create solidarity between the different actors and reconcile their interests (Prost *et al*., 1994).

* In the Beaufort case, co-operatives negotiate internally the advisory procedure on technical control of milk quality adapted to the productive practices of farmers in each catchment area, thus reinforcing the cohesion within the sector. This work is being validated in a dairy co-operative.

* In the Brocciu situation, the proposed model shifted its focus from the number of days authorised for consumption to defining requirements for the microbiological quality of all AOC products. This placed coop representatives (former farmers processing their milk and present farmers supplying theirs to a co-operative) in a central position.

A contribution to interprofessional co-operation

Results obtained with several AOC unions have led us to propose a specific role for systems research, i.e. helping farmers find their footing in the institutional game. Three sets of levers were identified.

The technical culture of farmers

Characterising the operation of livestock systems, with reference to « authentic and unvarying local uses and methods », sets the bases for defining systems of practices. The technical culture of the farmers is thus given recognition and concurrently their practices assume a *coherence* (within the production system) and *substance* (their diversity is no longer a handicap) they were not thought to possess (Albaladejo & Casabianca, 1994). They acquire in the eyes of the different observers a new *status* which gives the farmers a certain power in defining the elements to be protected under the AOC. As a result, farmer practices become one of the essential resources on which the originality of the origin-designated product is based.

Normalisation and definition

The list of constraints to which those wishing to acquire an AOC certification are submitted, is viewed from a new angle. Indeed, farmers are progressively able to distinguish between *voluntary local standards* (where constraints are linked to authenticity and the product's ambition) and *statutory standards* (a healthy, fair and marketable product). By including the farmers' criteria, a positive definition of the AOC product is reached which helps the farmers overcome their hostility towards imposed norms. The farmers are then able to move from an attitude of evasion to facing the issue of standardisation with an increased capacity for text interpretation. They can offer new arguments for justifying readjustment of standards which respect the logic of their systems.

Dynamizing the system

More generally, recognising the farmers' practices as being part and parcel of the identity of the product to be protected induces them to revise their views about *innovation*. As a matter of fact it then becomes possible to devise relevant forms of technical progress according to the evolution logic of the livestock system. Through this process, the farmers are able to drop their often highly defensive attitude and develop a more relaxed relationship with the other AOC parties (de Sainte Marie *et al.*, 1993). Recovering their *self-confidence* enables the farmers to *trust* the representatives of the other professional groups and to establish new interprofessional links.

Conclusion

The role of researchers. Obviously, researchers do not have ready-made solutions. The roles they play vary with the stage in the procedure: giving support to legitimacy aspects; producing analytical data and objective validation as experts; being informative partners helping structure the negotiation field. This highlights the *strategic impact* of any one data produced by the researchers in these approaches. The difficulty is to insert these data into the actors' game, to reinforce the position of each true owner of the AOC. Our results show that it is possible to involve farmers into institutional structures without their feeling dominated.

Sustainability of systems. An AOC union can be taken as an example of an institutional structure which rehabilitates local production systems and the farmers' professional qualifications. In promoting co-ordination around a collective property viewed as a *heritage*, this approach is of evident interest for local development policies. The sustainability of an AOC product viewed as a local resource rests on its being integrated as a collective patrimony by the local actors. This process, which mobilises the past, simultaneously transforms it in order to transmit it to future generations. Ensuring the future of typical products will help secure the perenniality of local production systems.

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