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Bernard C., Boutonnet J.P., Garnier A., Lerin F., Medolli B.

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Quality labels: a way to support the development of pastoral resources? Methodological insights based on the monographic analysis of Hasi Region – Northern Albania

C. Bernard*, J-P. Boutonnet, A. Garnier, F. Lerin and B. Medolli

CIHEAM - Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Montpellier
3191, route de Mende, 34093 Montpellier Cedex 5 (France)
*e-mail: bernard-mongin@iamm.fr

Abstract. BiodivBalkans is a research-action project in Albanian mountains, aiming at crossing environmental injunction of biodiversity conservation with economic objectives of rural development. The main hypothesis is that the building process of an appropriate label of sustainable development could provide an effective tool for territorial development and conservation of agro-biodiversity. Our understanding of the present situation in Hasi region is based on a historical approach both of landscape and agrarian system. An analysis of both village evolutions and farm trajectories allows identifying a way of further development, based on specific niche markets. A collective action is needed to build adequate labels of origin and quality, around an endemic breed of goat (the Hasi goat) and its products: kid meat, dried meat and cheese.

Keywords. Albania – Pastoralism – Agrobiodiversity – Quality labels – Agrarian systems.

Les labels de qualité : un moyen pour développer les ressources pastorales ? Approche méthodologique basée sur l'analyse monographique de la région du Hasi – Albanie du Nord

Résumé. *BiodivBalkans est un projet de recherche-action sur les montagnes albanaises, ayant pour objectif de combiner les injonctions de conservation de la biodiversité et celles du développement rural. L'hypothèse est que la construction de signes de développement durable peut procurer un instrument efficace de développement territorial et de conservation de l'agro-biodiversité. Notre appréciation de la situation est basée sur une approche historique des paysages et des systèmes agraires. Une analyse des villages et des trajectoires des systèmes de production en relation avec les disponibilités fourragères et les pâturages, permet d'envisager un développement de ce système agropastoral via des marchés de niches identifiés. Une action collective de construction de signes de qualité et d'origine est nécessaire, autour d'une race de chèvre endémique de la région (la chèvre du Has) et de ses produits principaux : la viande de cabri, la viande séchée et le fromage.*

Mots-clés. *Albanie – Pastoralisme – Agrobiodiversité – Labels de qualité – Systèmes agraires.*

I – Introduction

BiodivBalkans is a research-action project in Albanian mountains, aiming at crossing environmental injunction of biodiversity conservation with economic objectives of rural development. A particular focus has been made on Hasi region, in the North-East part of Albania, at the border with Kosovo. In this rural region, characterized by an agro-sylvo-pastoral way of farming, the main hypothesis of BiodivBalkans project's approach is that the building process of an appropriate label of quality/origin/sustainability/equity may provide an effective tool for territorial development and conservation of agro-biodiversity (Bérard and Marchenay, 2006). However, this positive relationship between biodiversity and appropriate labels of sustainable development cannot be taken for granted (Jonhs *et al.*, 2013). Many critical reviews highlight the need of further devel-

opments in the assessment of agriculture and biodiversity conflicts and their resolution, both at farming scale as well as in a landscape perspective (Cavrois, 2009; Henle *et al.*, 2008). This paper presents a descriptive and narrative approach, that articulates an agrarian system description (pastoral resources, practises and products) with a narration of landscape evolutions, in order (i) to understand the natural resources construction process – assuming the intrinsinque link between anthropic activities and biodiversity production, particularly in Mountainous Mediterranean ecosystems (Sirami *et al.*, 2010); and (ii) to determine the range and perimeter of a possible collective action, that would promote a sustainable territorial development.

II – From agro-sylvo-pastoral to pastoral systems: a century of transformations of landscape and farming systems in Hasi region

Three main periods have been defined (Garnier, 2013; Medolli, 2013). (i) *Hasi region as a "passive territory" in pre-communist times.* Due to its harsh mountainous Mediterranean climate and its important forest cover, the Hasi region was a "poor territory", characterized by a low yields of subsistence crops (mainly wheat, barley and rye), and specialized in pastoral livestock breeding. Winter forage scarcity was a strong limiting factor for the expansion of sheep and goat flock size, except for the large patriarchal families that can drive large flocks for inverse transhumance in Kosovo plains. (ii) *Communist massive agricultural specialization*. Starting from the drastic agrarian reform of 1945 led by the Communist Party, forests, pastures and wetlands were fully nationalized whereas agriculture lands were entering into a steady but full process of collectivization (Sjöberg, 1991). The agricultural communist model was based on the *ager* intensification and expansion. These intensification trends led to strong modifications of the previous pastoral system. Cooperatives were settled on the less productive areas and specialized in livestock breeding, whereas two State farms were created on recently deforested areas and specialized in cereal and fruits productions. The Fierza hydroelectric dam building (1971-1978) intensified this process. The tiny but fertile areas and pasture lands in the Drini plain were flooded, leading to the displacement of some villages on the recently deforested uplands: around 5,300 ha of new agricultural lands were opened. These large cultivated areas were massively mechanized, systematic irrigation coupled with larger use of chemicals and fertilizers led to a rapid increase of the production. (iii) *Transition period: decrease of agricultural production and small ruminant husbandry*. Starting from 1991, the so-called "transition period" is characterized by the privatization of production means and agricultural lands. Cooperatives and State farms were dismantled and private property restored with the enactment of Law 7501, all the land was divided up among villagers on a per capita basis. Under these new political and economic conditions, the newly created small scale private farms could not maintain sufficient investments: irrigation system, agriculture machinery, inputs, etc. (Civici and Lerin, 1997). In the Hasi region, intensive fruit trees orchards on hilly slopes were abandoned as well as intensive husbandry; parts of previous large agricultural areas were turned into individual plots exploited for auto-subsistence farming, other were converted to pastures or simply abandoned to spontaneous reforestation. Livestock was reduced to mixed flocks of 10 to 50 heads (cattle and small ruminants) per farm, summer pasture practises were disused. At the same time, temporary or permanent emigration was massive, especially to England. The 1997 crisis and Kosovo conflict (1999-2000) at the border also deeply altered Hasi territory and its development.

III – A "residual pastoral system"

Therefore, the communist agro-pastoral system characterized by a dominant component of agriculture has suddenly collapsed, leading to the current situation in Hasi district that can be defined

as a sort of “residual pastoral system”, based on a multitude of very small mixed crop and livestock holdings. As grazing areas are not a limiting factor in this “last remaining people” situation, feeding strategies are mainly based on pasture on non-cultivated land. Nowadays, livestock farming activities are reshaping a new agrarian landscape around different evolution patterns. Different village types are identified: (i) villages from the plateau hilly area (from 500 to 700 meters), characterized by high production capacity: easy access to hilly area pastures, good agricultural and fodder production capacity; (ii) villages from the plateau hilly area, with low production capacity, defined by good access to hilly pastures and/or mountain pastures, with limited agricultural fodder production capacity; (iii) villages from the perched plateau (1,200 meters), identified by good mountain pasture access, good fodder production capacity, but a low agricultural production. From this first village scale typology, the farms are classified into three main development trajectories according to the methodology used by Biba (Biba *et al.*, 2013) :

(i) *Expanding exploitations*: middle to “large” mixed farming exploitations, characterized by livestock specialization – growing mixed or specialized flocks from 50 heads and more – with further projects of development, based on paid workforce and capital availability.

(ii) *Declining small ruminant exploitations*: small to average mixed farming exploitations, minimally exploited, characterized by small to middle size flocks (from 10 to 50 heads) and complementary agricultural production with few perspective of takeover in a near future.

(iii) *Agricultural specialization*: a rather unusual category in Hasi region, characterized by agricultural (cereal and fruits) farming specialization, based on leasing and mechanization of additional agricultural lands, whereas livestock actives remain secondary.

IV – Building appropriate labels of sustainable development

Considering this typology of farms trajectories in its context, what kind of appropriate labels might be proposed to cross agrobiodiversity conservation and local rural development? It seems that both in terms of landscape ecology and capacity of collective action, this process has to valorise the agro-sylvo-pastoral systems of farming. Different kinds of labels can be used, all widely employed in the European Union (Sans *et al.*, 2011): (i) labels of origin (mainly geographical indications), which are related with the *terroir* (Hasi region), are State guaranteed labels under the Albanian law; (ii) private collective marks can be declined into: labels of *equity* or “fair trade”, which are private certification marks; labels of *environmental quality* (organic mainly); and at large, labels of *sustainability* in relation with protected areas, landscape conservation, natural parks, etc. These labels can be used alone or in combination.

Hasi goat breed is endemic to the region (Hoda *et al*., 2011). The breed and its products have been identified as the most adequate first step toward a sustainable rural development strategy (Medolli, 2013). Homogeneous flocks had been identified especially in the plateau area, characterized by its geomorphological “doline” system (Krutaj *et al.*, 1998). These systems of funnel-shaped hollows in a karst region allow higher forage production on a poor limestone soil. Moreover, Hasi meat products are nationally known for their quality. Products that could be valorised are mainly: kid meat, dried meat (*pastërma*), cheese. Even if today, most of dairy processing is homemade, market opportunities seem to appear and some small size factories are selling Hasi cheese until Tirana, the capital city of Albania. To be chosen and developed, the adequate label of sustainable development corresponding to these products needs a shared diagnosis, elaborated jointly by farmers, processors and other actors of the value chain (shareholders); and territorial authorities, national agencies, environmental NGOs, etc. (stakeholders). The aim of this process is to identify (i) appropriate actions in terms of breed selection and promotion; (ii) best pastoral practices in favor of landscape and ecology; (iii) their impact on the quality of the products, perceived by

consumers; (iv) appropriate livestock farming system incentives as well as value chain; (v) possible products identification and definition – book of requirements – likely to go toward a GI related to the Hasi *terroir*; (vi) products marketing chain toward final consumers and retailers.

V – Conclusions

A comprehensive sustainable development approach – agro-biodiversity valorization and conservation – requires a reflexive and practical iterative method all along the collective action process. This process brings shareholders and stakeholders together with a common understanding of these challenges, and finds the best fit between private interests, management of the club/common good (labels), and public good (agro-biodiversity conservation). It has to be complementary to the breed identification process, environmental assessment, production system analyses and support to appropriate pastoral practices. A set of various labels can be combined in order to fit with the different challenges of natural resources conservation, livestock farming development and market opportunities. Obviously, as shown by previous GI success stories, there is no simple recipe: all cannot be done at the same time and collective dynamics may start from a very small coalition (Boutonnet *et al*., 2009).

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