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Regional Images and Marketing of Quality Products as Part of Rural Development: The Case of Greece

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Abstract: The terms regional image, place-promotion, place marketing, regional development and marketing of quality products seem to be used interchangeably within the literature reflecting the variety of definitions related to the subject area. The current paper overviews the relevance of regional imagery to consumers; the perceptions of regional and quality products; and the new directions in rural development policies from a marketing point of view. The case of Greece is briefly presented for illustrative purposes.

1. Introduction

The probability is that if questioned on the future strategies for European Agriculture any person acquainted with European Agricultural Policy would confirm the need for the sector to switch from a production orientated approach to a market oriented approach. Thus, this paper will examine non-well defined concepts in the agricultural marketing and promotion of agricultural quality food products.

Marketing has lately been incorporated in some policies and regulations regarding agricultural products. Through these regulations some financial assistance has been given to organizations and producers' associations to carry out some research and acquire information concerning the marketing of their products as well as a deeper knowledge of consumers' requirements. There was also a need to answer questions for the various images and prospects of a product or a category of products (i.e. fruits, vegetables, dairy products etc.) in order to design a more efficient national marketing strategy.

Ritson and Kuznesof (1996) argue that marketing has much to contribute in terms of sustaining particular rural areas, but demonstrate that in order to succeed one must go to the extent where a case-by-case basis is assessed and takes into account factors such as government intervention and the managerial attitudes and operating philosophies of businesses. Moreover, Gold and Ward, (1994), define "place promotion" as "the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities or areas to a target audience". Accordingly, along the same lines Ashworth and Voogd, H., (1994), define "place marketing" as "...a process whereby local activities are related as closely as possible to the demands of targeted customers". The intention is to maximize the efficient social and economic functioning of the area under consideration, in accordance with whatever wider goals have been established.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a the formulation of this functioning which might result in the building of a national strategy for European countries where many structural obstacles occur and there is wide range of factors which affect the promotion of regional and quality food products produced by agricultural enterprises. It will begin with a presentation of theoretical

approaches concerning the key ideas and concepts of rural development. It will then examine the relevance of regional images to consumers and the consumer perceptions of quality products as they have been recorded in the current literature sources. The case of Greece will be used in every case for illustrative purposes.

2. Rural Development: Key Ideas and Concepts

This section will overview the theoretical approaches concerning rural development policies in the agricultural sector and the new directions of these policies.

2.1. Theoretical Approaches

There are a variety of ways to define the term rural development, beyond the somewhat narrow interpretation of development where rural development is simply defined as a “raising of national or regional standards of living”, (Clark, *et al.*, 1994). Marssden, Lowe & Whatmore (1990) defined rural development as a useful category given the historical dominance of the social relations of agricultural production, arguing that rural labor processes retain distinctive characteristics even though agriculture may long have ceased to be the dominant economic activity.

The recent move towards the understanding of different discourses of rurality has been nourished in what Philo terms “neglected rural others” (1992). The result is a move towards more nuanced and subtle interpretations of rural development, which have been enriched by accounts of rurality which examine aspects of gender (Whatmore, *et al.*, 1994), race (Spooner, 1996), sexuality (Bell and Valentine, 1995), age (Potter and Lobley, 1992) and cultural identity (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992) as they are played out in a variety of rural settings.

In general terms, recent debates have centered on issues of how rural development is achieved, issues which have brought about studies of power, social exclusion, uneven development and deprivation in rural areas (Shucksmith, 1990).

Although different authors lay different emphasis on particular features and their relative importance, there seems to be a general agreement that rural areas today are profoundly affected by several broad processes which may originate beyond the immediate locale, region, or even nation-state.

Therefore, a rural development policy is a public policy. It is difficult to identify an overall aim for rural development policy across EU member countries. However, an acceptable, but arbitrarily set goal for rural development policies is to maintain rural population.

Rural Development in Greece is highly regarded as an agricultural development policy. In general, its objectives include the improvement of the income earned by rural households, increase in the employment opportunities, diversification of the economic base of the rural area, and the improvement in the quality of life through the provision of infrastructure and services. The establishments of national rural development policies were not followed by strategies and local plans designed to achieve the set of multi-objective policies. There was not any administrative framework to ensure co-ordination within or between jurisdiction, i.e. between different initiatives and incentives, different policies and central, regional and local authorities.

2.2. Rural Development Policies

Since the country's accession into the European Union in 1980, Greece gradually joined the existing EU regional and rural development policies. Following the 1989 set of reforms, the whole

country was classified under objective 1 (development of lagging regions) and concentrated financial aid has been directed from the structural funds to the most disadvantageous regions (Commission, 1989). The Community's rural development policy is aimed primarily at revitalizing the economic fabric of rural areas facing socio-economic problems. The purpose of this action is due to population loss, retarded development, structural change and declining farming activity to the fullest possible degree. Effort is concentrated on improving efficiency of farm production, processing and distribution. Further effort is allocated to diversification and specialization of production and on activities that may be complementary or independent to production.

The E.U has steadily reduced the assistance given to individual projects and increased the aid through programmes, i.e. closely co-ordinated funding programmes involving member states and regional or local authorities as well as the structural funds. Rural development is now supported by either Community Initiatives that are programmes spanning the whole EU, such as LEADER, Horizontal Measures, or Operational Programmes that are confirmed to an individual member state.

2.3. Effectiveness of Policy and New Directions

Current critiques of contemporary rural development policies seem to revolve around the issues of diversification, sustainability and the question of how to devise policies, which are adapted to the enormous diversity of rural areas across the EU. As Hodge, (1996) notes: "where efforts are targeted to deal with problems, they tend either to be focused spatially on designated areas which demonstrate particular problems...or else they are simply targeted on settlements below a particular size threshold...Is this the best way of directing efforts towards those individuals most in need?".

However as Lowe (1996) notes: "Opportunities to diversify farm incomes depend on the strength and diversity of the local and regional economy. The focus on government intervention to promote rural development and employment should therefore apply to the rural and regional economy and not to the agricultural sector". Dimara and Skuras, (1997) support that grant aid instruments are not particularly associated with either the decision to create more jobs nor the extent of job creation in rural areas. This represents a change from the previous sectoral approach to policy making, whereby agriculture assumed a central role and was necessary for the undertaking of modern and alternative marketing strategies. This notion is presumed to greatly enhance the development capacity of lagging rural areas.

At the E.U policy-making level, given the need to reduce spending on the C.A.P, there is strong support for diversification into new activities, and for the development of niche markets for quality products and services. A recent O.E.C.D report (1995) also suggests that "niche markets and the activities to satisfy those markets have positive implications for rural development. They further create employment opportunities, encourage entrepreneurship and strengthen social cohesion".

In Greece important policy documents recognize that agriculture, despite its diminishing importance, will continue to influence important aspects of the rural socio-economic fabric. In addition, agricultural policy reforms will give rise to the continuation of rural socio-economic fabric. Finally in many cases countervailing adjustment pressures will arise throughout the agro-food sector, to provide instruments to help farmers adapt to new challenges which have so far been neglected, (O.E.C.D., 1996).

3. Regional Images and Food Products

This section provides insight into:

- the definition of regional images
- the relevance of regional images to consumers.

3.1 Definition of Regional Images

Regional Images may be defined as representations of places (Gold and Ward, 1994, Kneafsey, 1997) which consist of one or more of a variety of elements: people, animals, landscapes; including land, water and sky, sound, and arguably, taste and smell through their evocation. Taken together, these elements portray themes, which are designed to convey regional characteristics. By extension, analysis of regional images should take cognisance of the underlying value systems and power relations (Kneafsey, 1997).

Reflecting a wide-angled view of place images and their origins, Burgess (1982) offers the following definition: "Place images comprise an individual's beliefs, impressions, ideas and evaluations of different parts of the country". Edwards (1996) notes in her review of postcard images from around the globe "...the meaning of images becomes impermanent, free-floating, appropriated into viewer's cultural discourse."

Fleming and Roth (1991) define specific images as representations of real landscapes, which are used to advertise products such as holiday destinations or airlines and they make the point that there are generic landscapes, which are symbolic of certain countries - green Irish fields and French vineyards being two obvious examples.

Moran's (1993) study of the French and American wine appellation systems notices a direct link between product and place through conceptualization of the appellation system for French wine as "a form of territorialization devised to regulate and capture some of the advantages/niches of some of the participants in the industry". Bell and Valentine (1997) suggest that the different actors create geographical "lores" about commodities in the commodity system. They go on to note that the link between place and product can be so strong that "almost any product which has some tie to a place - no matter how 'invented' this may be, can be sold as a commodity identifying it with that region in question".

3.2. Relevance of Images to Consumers

By referring to some case studies consisting of different groups of consumers, Burgess (1989) demonstrates the significance of gender, class and 'cultural competence' in peoples' relations with different media texts. Although her focus is on environmental meanings, Burgess reaches certain conclusions, which are relevant to the present study's objectives by posing questions. Similarly, Morale's (1986, cited in Burgess 1989) work on TV programmes shows that subliminal associations of the product with certain "meanings" are not produced at the very moment when one is viewing programmes, but arise in social interactions as people talk about TV in the pub, laundromat, on the bus to work etc.

Treagear et al, (1997) explores the ways in which perceived authenticity of regional food in the North of England is based on personal factors such as knowledge and experience, as well as product related factors and situated factors. As Pred (1996) shows, "Advertising is rarely the sole or even the most important source of prepurchase knowledge about the existence and qualities of a particular good or service. It is seldom the single stimulator or want and desire of a product and, only exceptionally the primary means through which awareness of needs arises

in everyday life". In a similar vein, Crang (1996) notes that "knowledge about commodities is not what enables an industry to go on, but is constructed through rather complex discursive fields." This kind of awareness of the conceptuality of image-consumption could inform the present study-researchers about the consumers of quality products.

3.3. Factors Affecting Regional Food

Food products have a land-based geographical origin, which implies strong associations between foods and places (Berard and Marchenay, 1995). The possible effects of region of origin on consumer behaviour are, however, relatively unexplored. With respect to food consumer behaviour studies (Khan, 1981, Shephard, 1989, e.t.c.) the complexity of factors affecting food preferences, including environmental, social and psychological factors is highlighted.

Recent research in England (Delamont, 1995, Urry, 1995, Hughes, G., et al ., 1995, e.t.c.) has explicitly aimed to provide insights into consumer perceptions of linkages between places and foods.

Treager, A., *et al.*, (1997) mentioned a number of factors defining a "regional food" and identified perceived authenticity as a major issue in the acceptability of a regional food as truly "regional". The main factors the authors have noticed are the Personal, Product-related and Situational factors.

- Personal factors: the production of food in a specific area is not sufficient in itself to make the product authentic. Personal factors affecting the perceived authenticity of regional foods included "knowledge" and "experience".
- Product-related factors: a number of this category of factors such as the product name, its appearance, and packaging and ingredient information are also viewed as a means of judging a food's regional authenticity. These factors, combined with personal knowledge and experience, are what lead to accentuated acceptance or rejection of a regional food as authentic.
- Situational factors: these include the place and context of the purchase or consumption of a regional food, served to enhance perceptions of authenticity.

3.4. Definitions of Regional Images in Greece

Literature on regional imagery in Greece does not exist. If references on rural development in Greece are very few, reference to the term "Regional Images" is completely absent, if unknown in academic literature. However, in the common language, the term "regional image" is frequently used to describe places that possess certain characteristics that should be utilized for promoting the area.

Regional images have also not been frequently used in everyday marketing approaches. A few LEADER programmes have attempted to market their area and promote a regional image successfully. More specifically, Skuras and Vakrou, (1997) pointed out that in Greece several organizations responsible for specific products (like ELAIS for olive oil) have conducted research and have applied their own marketing strategies which refer accordingly to the expansion of their international competitiveness or the enhancement of the domestic market. Finance for such actions, research etc, has been facilitated by many different sources, such as the E.U, the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as funding from the organizations themselves.

4. Quality Products

This section will examine the nature of quality products from a marketing and consumer behaviour point of view.

4.1. Definition of Quality

There are a variety of definitions of quality, which usually relate to the satisfaction of customer needs. O' Neil and Black (1996) define 'quality' as an operational concept, namely, "an organization's ability to produce and deliver that which is demanded in a manner which consistently meets consumer expectations". Vastoia (1997) argues that one of the most important aspects of quality is the satisfaction of explicit and implicit needs. Rossen (1984) adds the concept of reliability in his suggestion that "the term 'quality' taken by itself implies a level of performance, taste and so forth, provided by the product on average". Whilst there are many definitions of perceived quality, most agree that it is linked to the product's suitability towards the purpose for which it has been bought (Vastoia, 1997).

Different products have different quality criteria and consumer perceptions of what constitute quality vary for specific products and between individuals, regions and countries. The Scottish Food Strategy Group (1993) developed the following working definition of a quality product:

"A quality product or service is one which is differentiated in a positive manner by one or more factors from the standard product. It is recognized as such by the consumer and can therefore command a market benefit if is effectively marketed".

Sylvander (1993) provides a list of quality indicators, which cover determined features both subjectively and objectively. These include:

- Price
- Product appearance (including packaging)
- Certification (by state, professional organization or external body)
- Specifications
- Individual "skill" of the buyer
- Individual or collective trade mark

4.2. Legislation on Agricultural and Food Products

The Community has restrained its regulatory policy to fields where public health protection, economic protection and information to consumers and fair-trading are involved. In certain cases, where necessary, the harmonization of vertical issues still applies. For other issues, where harmonization is not necessary, the principle of mutual recognition applies (Papathanasiou, 1995).

The EU has expressed strong support for the promotion of quality products where quality is defined as being associated with particular rural areas or origins. The *Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of September 1996* (CEC, 1996), refers to the importance of quality guarantees and the certification of enterprises and products in general. It points out that the regional origin of a product, as a guarantee of quality, is of increasing importance "at a time when trust between producers and consumers is more difficult to establish in larger markets". Legislation to protect agricultural products of geographical origin and of special character was introduced by Regu-

lation 2081/92/EEC protecting geographical indications and designations of origin, by Regulation 2082/92/EEC providing for the award of certificates of specific character, and by Regulation 2092/91/EEC providing for the labeling and advertising of the products of biological agriculture.

The Committee of the Regions referred to the need for comparable standards in the member-states as a means of ensuring protection for consumers and promoting competition. The Committee also recommended strengthening the synergy between the different agricultural policy instruments and the Structural Funds, to foster quality, particularly as part of Community initiatives and pilot projects. The creation of regional quality networks to support local products is viewed as being particularly noteworthy. In addition support of the implementation of Directive 42/93 on small enterprises and marketing structures is recommended.

4.3. Consumer Perceptions of Quality Products

The OECD (1995) report on *Niche markets as rural development strategy* states that quality is a matter of perceptions, values and tastes of the consumer, and that quality is increasingly being defined as something that is custom produced as opposed to mass produced. Motives for purchasing are associated with ideas of self-identity and prestige. More and more people are looking for individualized products that are not easily available to other consumers (OECD, 1995). This has profound implications for a range of food products. It is difficult to obtain precise information relating to consumer perceptions of quality products.

Some general trends have been observed in terms of consumer perceptions of quality products. According to Parker (1990), consumer concerns relating to health and to environmental deterioration undoubtedly influence the introduction of quality labels and assurance schemes. Traceability and other food quality assurance schemes are viewed as being of particular importance in allaying consumer concerns relating to health hazards (O' Connor, 1997). Labeling of organic produce contributes to increased awareness of such products, although the largest markets tend to be among organic purists or among persons who are strongly disposed toward organic methods of production (Roddy, 1994).

Therefore, a lot of work is needed on this aspect, since it appears to be that a consumer's choice for a quality product is affected by many factors. From a preliminary study of PDO consumers, it appears that consumers are not so well informed and that the element of quality and how this is perceived needs to be classified and related to choice (Fotopoulos, et. al., 1997).

4.4. Markets of Quality Products

Although the geographical literature presents little evidence on the size of the market for quality products, key policy-forming institutions suggest that there is a strong demand for quality products.

Clark and Bradford (1989) argue that "advertising has not simply promoted brands; it has been a major mechanism in the creation of wants." In contrast, Burgess (1982) cites Jefkins who, in 1974, asserted that a company with new products "cannot expect super salesmen and heavy advertising to pulverize the market into purchasing. The market will only respond when its desires are active and its confidence high."

A recent report published by the OECD (1995) claims that people are increasingly seeking "quality, scarcity and novelty of products" and advocates the development of 'niche products' as a strategy for rural development. It is also claimed that "a pure niche market is a market segment: small, narrow and specific".

In Greece, we can argue that there is no clear and distinct information on how the market for quality products is structured and evolves, particularly in relation to other conventional products. The observed increase of the standards of living of the Greek population, continuing urbanization, and changes in consumer culture has resulted in an increase in recreation and consumption of organic foodstuff. There is a notable return to nature and attempts are being made to live a healthier and more natural life (Skuras and Vakru, 1997).

4.5. Quality Assurance Schemes and Quality Marks

There are a variety of schemes in operation, which have legal backing at different scales. The primary E.U quality and origin criteria currently in operation are:

- **Protected Designation of Origin (PDO):** the quality or characteristics of the product are exclusively or essentially due to a particular geographical environment with its inherent natural and human factors. The production, processing and preparation of these products take place in a defined geographical area (Council Reg. No. 2081/92).
- **Protected Geographical Indication (PGI):** the specific quality, reputation or characteristics of the product are *attributable* to its geographic origin and the production, and/or processing and/or preparation take place in the defined geographic area (Council Reg. No. 2081/92).
- **Certificate of Special Character:** these are the feature(s), which distinguish an agricultural product or foodstuff clearly from other similar products or foodstuffs in the same category (Council Reg. No. 2082/92).

Moran's (1993) work on wine appellations draws out some useful insights into the differences between schemes, which are used to assure quality. He notes that there is a distinction between 'geographic indications' and appellations d'origine. The former is simply the attestation that the grapes come from a particular region, locality or field, whilst the latter has a series of restrictions such as authorized varieties of grapes, yields per hectare, viticulture methods, and sometimes wine-making techniques, which producers must adhere to if they are to use authorized place names.

4.6. Promotion of Quality Products & Cross-Sector Linkages in Greece

Nowadays there are efforts to promote the element of quality products. These efforts are included in broader attempts to promote Greek lifestyle and tourism in Greece. Large campaigns have been launched by the Greek Tourism Organization with the collaboration of the Organization for Promoting Exports (O.P.E) and other producers' bodies for promoting Greece and the Greek diet. Further attempts have also been made in co-operation with other Mediterranean countries for promoting the idea of the Mediterranean cuisine (Food and Drinks, 1995). Olympic Airways, the national transporter, launched a program, whereby only typical Greek foods are served during their flights. Apart from that promotion, more efforts have been made by local and regional authorities in Crete to promote the Cretan diet. To accomplish such a task, producers have made joint efforts together with the Confederation of Cretan hotel and tourism enterprises, to represent nearly all Cretan hotels and accommodation (Food and Drink, 1995 and personal communication).

5. Conclusive Remarks

In a world-wide context, marketing strategies change rapidly and constantly. Rural and urban areas in western European – as elsewhere – are increasingly adopting cultural markets as key resources in the pursuit of territorial development objectives. These strategies are responses to extra local forces that have demonstrated a powerful capacity to undermine the socio-economic vibrancy of local areas (C. Ray, 1998).

Dimara *et. al.*, (2001) provide strong evidence that quality wines catering for niche markets are associated with certain regions. This geographic association has, in most cases, been important in influencing the perceptions of consumers, their behaviour and the final demand for quality wine. The main factors determining this type of behaviour, in relation to the specific product are the rural origins of the household's head and the individuals' personal experience. All those factors that represent rural image formation, quality of wine, region's heritage, and culture and local traditions, imply that all consumers who have such a regional image spend more on quality wine than do other consumers. In such a way the product's value is enhanced by the linking of regional images such as landscapes, cultural traditions and heritage to consumer behaviour concerning quality wine. On the other hand, consumers formulating a regional image based on the landscape and other physical features of the area spend, on average, less money on quality wine. This indicates that, regarding images formed according to region, the market is adequately fragmented and, different pricing policies may be applied.

Therefore, all these factors reveal the potentiality for developing niche markets, which may cover the current rural development needs in Greece. Greek producers, particularly the small and medium sized ones have to be initiated in order to create a partnership and synergy for undertaking integrated marketing activities. These producers must pay attention and provide a great amount of significance to marketing efforts. More specifically, this support must be focused on the monitoring and controlling of quality assurance schemes regarding agricultural commodities.

An interesting initiative policy can be suggested at this point concerning the wine sector and the EU policies for the better promotion and placement of the Greek agricultural products. All Greek communities and businesses engaged in the agricultural sector can increase their competitiveness if a rural decentralized policy which includes specific and strict selective quality constraints is applied. The fact that unconventional activities are associated with smaller farms, in conjunction with off-farm work, signifies the importance of establishing an integrated rural development approach in areas such as Greece. These farm-businesses have to rapidly change their marketing strategies, in order to avoid the fact that when product prices and subsidies decrease this undoubtedly leads to a decline in farm incomes. This is especially true for farms practicing traditional cultivations whose low profitability and gloomy prospects have created an interest in the market integration strategies.

Also, by encouraging the enhancement of quality products producers should aim to apply new market integrated activities and make this a goal of public policy. In the long term, following such a strategy might increase the competitiveness of the Greek small and medium sized agricultural enterprises. This development will increase the attractiveness of specific products and may generate further market integration strategies and tactics. Furthermore, additional efforts are needed in the field of quality, since the market will tend to be far more demanding in the future.

All the aforementioned facts clearly reveal the role of the cultural economy approach to rural development. This result is in accordance with the EU rural development policy which encour-

ages territories to design and implement strategies that identify local resources in the hope that this overcomes the structural barriers to economic convergence. Lagging rural areas, such as Greece, must make this attempt in order to localize economic control. Strong financial support must be provided to local organizations and institutions, which have the capability to design, implement and deliver policy. The source of regionalism must be considered as the main element of the Greek agricultural economy, which has to be engaged in self-promotion procedures in order to preserve its cultural identity and develop its socio-economic vibrancy. What is also needed is specialized market research to monitor the changing consumption trends and to assist, those involved in the marketing and promotion process, by providing information and feedback.

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