

## **PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF A LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Globalization of the food supply chains, and massive industrialized food production systems enabled efficiency and food specialization. However, COVID-19 pandemic shattered the global food chains and limited the possibilities for food distribution. This problem demonstrated the importance of local food production. During Covid-19 pandemic the local food systems played a key role in agricultural sustainability and food security. As a result, the local food production provided a contribution economic stability in country during turbulent periods of times. However, local food production has a social and cultural impact. The local food systems are essential for authenticating a national culture representing a variety of traditional agricultural products and food. Thus, preserving local food production is important for economic and cultural reasons. The purpose of this paper is to determine the current situation of implementation of the EU schemes of geographical indications and traditional specialties in North Macedonia. The results are showing that there is a progress based on some efforts with limited success for developing and promoting quality schemes. There is a need for strengthening local community resilience. Recommendations intended for policy makers and producers for improvement of the local food system in the country are identified. This could be achieved through devoted involvement of all stakeholders, better promotion, long-term systemic support measures, education for improving the safety and quality of the products and better cooperation between the stakeholders.

**Key words:** geographical indications schemes, local food, traditional food.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Food systems are crucial for ensuring food security and nutrition for all, and they need to be more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. In the last decade, consumers have become increasingly interested in local foods. Providing consumers with safe, nutritious food, improving farmer remuneration, preserving natural resources, and mitigating climate change are necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic shattered global food chains and limited food distribution. Producing local food is crucial in this situation. As a result of the current economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, local food systems have become increasingly important to agricultural sustainability and food security. Thus, food production in the country contributes to economic stability during turbulent times. However, local food production has social and cultural implications. Local food systems represent traditional agricultural products and foods that authenticate national cultures. Preserving local food production is significant for economic and cultural reasons. While "local" has received considerable attention, there is still no universal definition of Local food system (LFS). "Local" can be interpreted in many ways. EU Regulation (EU) No

807/2014 specifies that Member States' rural development programmes should define local markets eligible for support by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Consequently, local food scales vary across the EU. Nevertheless, the EU Joint Research Centre describes LFS as "food systems that produce, process, and retail foods within a defined geographical area (within a 20 to 100 km radius) (Enthoven and Van den Broeck, 2021). In many countries around the world, support for local agriculture has been a burgeoning issue involving the development of the local foods' movement as alternative marketing. Producers in all member states are to gain benefits, and consumers have guarantees (Bardone, 2019). The European Union (EU) has developed a set of regulations known as geographical indications (GIs) schemes, which are intended to protect and promote products that have specific characteristics linked to their geographical origin and traditional products. These regulations are designed to ensure that consumers can have confidence in the authenticity and origin of the products they purchase. The main regulation governing GIs schemes is Regulation (EU) No. 1151/2012, also known as the "quality package". This regulation establishes the legal framework for protecting and using geographical indications for agricultural products, foodstuffs, and traditional specialties guaranteed. In addition to this main regulation, the EU has also adopted EU Regulation 664/2014 and EU Regulation 668/2014. These regulations provide further details on how GIs schemes should be implemented, including the criteria products must meet and how the logos associated with these schemes should be used to be eligible for a GI or traditional specialties guaranteed designation. Studies have indicated that GIs play a significant role in rural development. A GI offers small and economically challenged rural households a chance to produce food with added value and improve their economic standing (Kovačević et al, 2022). This paper aims to determine the current situation for local food development and implementation of the EU schemes of geographical indications and traditional specialties in North Macedonia. It also gives recommendations for improving the local food system in the country.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study aimed to determine the current situation for local food development and the implementation of the EU schemes of geographical indications and traditional specialties in North Macedonia. Data were collected through document analysis. Document analysis involved reviewing relevant legislation and policy documents related to the quality schemes for agricultural products in North Macedonia. These documents included the Law on the Quality of Agricultural Products, the Decisions on Registering Products with Geographical Indications, and the Rulebooks.

The research focused on the current situation of local food development and implementation of the EU schemes of geographical indications and traditional specialties.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Quality schemes in North Macedonia**

As previous stated the EU recognizes three quality schemes: the PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), the PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) and the TSG (Traditional Speciality Guarantee). By promoting and protecting quality agricultural product and food names, these schemes encourage diverse agricultural production, protect product names from misuse, evocation and imitation, and provide consumers with information on the products' specific characteristics (Srbinovska et al., 2020) For the authorization of traditional food from non-EU countries, Regulation (EU) 2017/2468 sets out the administrative and scientific requirements for a food from a third country to be allowed to be sold in the EU, based on the Novel Foods Regulation 2015/2283. These requirements are intended to ensure that traditional

foods from third countries are safe for consumption and that their labeling is accurate and not misleading. It lays down the procedures for the applications of the authorization, the conditions for the authorization, the conditions for the withdrawal of the authorization, the rules for the labeling of the novel foods and the requirements for the notifications of the traditional foods from third countries.

North Macedonia has established legal framework for protection traditional products allowing PDO, PGI and TSG GIs marks (OG 140/2010). The quality policy legislation is aligned with EU Acquis, but quality schemes are slow in development and promotion. Control procedure implementation responsibilities has Food and Veterinary Agency (FVA), and only primary agricultural products are controlled by State Agricultural Inspectorate. In accordance with the Law on the Quality of Agricultural Products, “Ohrid Cresha”, „Belasicki chestnut honey”, „Ovchepolian pramenka lamb” were entered into the MAFWE Register of Products with PGI labels and the following requests for GIs have been submitted so far: „Bistra sheep kashkaval”, „Bistra white sheep cheese”, „Valandovo white winter grapes”, „Mariovski Honey”, „Bieno cheese from Mariovo” and there is interest expressed for GI label for „Bukovska pepper” and „Madzun”.

In 2019 the new Rulebook on production conditions and hygiene requirements and marketing of food of animal origin intended for direct supply, localized activity, in geographical or economic restrictions, as well as general and the special requirements for the application of traditional methods of production, processing and distribution of food with traditional characteristics (OG 144/2019 and OG 152/2020) was adopted. The new adopted provisions on flexibility and derogations for traditional products with introducing education programmes for the specialized small-scale processing facilities for implementation of standard technologies and food safety requirements is a good base for development quality schemes in the country and increases the possibility for producers to engage in quality schemes.

The strategic documents in the country (National strategy on Agriculture and Rural development (2021-2027), National Strategy for Sustainable development in Republic of North Macedonia (2009-2030), Food Safety Strategy of Republic of North Macedonia (2021-2025), outline a number of constraints faced by rural communities, including limited investment in agricultural infrastructure, aging of the rural population, and difficult access to markets, lack of opportunities for income diversification, limited knowledge of sustainable practices, land degradation, and exposure to climate change.

The introduction of food safety requirements, including registration and approval conditions, poses a significant challenge for small producers in North Macedonia. These food safety requirements have not been implemented by farmers due to a number of factors (lack of knowledge, inadequate facilities, and equipment, lack of funds for raising loans for production improvement, inability to use rural development measures, misunderstandings with local communities, etc.). As most of them are registered as farmers (Single Farm Register), not as food producers, they cannot apply for product protection. Therefore, farmers primarily use direct support funds rather than rural development funds.

Producers, consumers, and communities can benefit from the implementation of PGI and TSG labels, but it requires considerable time, resources, and effort. A summary of the main challenges and benefits of TSG and PGI labels in Latvia and Estonia has been provided by Bardonea and Spalvėna, 2019. According to their results, EU quality schemes benefit producers, such as promoting traditional foods, especially for tourists. The study also revealed several challenges. The lack of national policies, low awareness of the possible benefits as well as standardization of a traditional recipe and production method are some of the main challenges reported by the authors. Traditional food producers may lack the resources to organize themselves as an interest group with sufficient administrative power and maintain surveillance of registered products.

## Local Food Development in North Macedonia

In the Balkans and North Macedonia, agriculture plays a significant role in reducing poverty and developing rural areas. A growing global demand for high quality and diverse agrofood products also offers significant opportunities for the Balkan agro-food sector to increase both production levels and quality (Tekiner, 2021). According to the OECD (2019), “ensuring national and international market access” and “developing niche markets, especially for organic and local products” are two key factors for sustainable development of the sector in the region.

In disadvantaged rural regions where low farm incomes and a lack of opportunities can lead to out-migration, local food systems are often seen as a way to enhance social cohesion and community development. Additionally, they contribute to the social cohesion of urban areas, by giving people access to fresh and affordable food produced close to where they live (European Parliament, 2016). According to a Eurobarometer survey published in 2011, nine out of ten citizens agree that buying products from local farms has benefits. More recently, Eurobarometer (2016) reported that four out of five European citizens are either fairly or very concerned about strengthening farmers' roles in the food chain.

The Republic of North Macedonia is rich in a variety of traditional agricultural products and food, local food initiatives can play a key role in achieving environmental, social and economic sustainability of the food system. The main challenges for local/traditional food producers are: Maintaining food safety and quality; Increasing competitiveness; and respecting the demands and expectations of consumers. Small producers have difficulty complying with food safety regulations, including the need to register as a food establishment. Due to many factors, farmers have not implemented these food safety regulations (a lack of knowledge, inadequate facilities and equipment, lack of funds or conditions for raising loans to improve production, inability to use rural development measures, misunderstandings with local communities, etc.). Most of them are registered as farmers (Single Farm Register), but not as food producers, so they cannot submit a request for protection of products. Direct support funds are therefore mainly used by farmers rather than rural development funds. (Srbinovska *et al.*, 2020)

Multiple sectors play vital roles in a community's development and maintenance of a sustainable local food system. The study by Castellanos *et al.* (2016) explored the perceptions of twenty-two representatives from the civil society, public, and private sectors in Dayton, Ohio. Administrative and political barriers, lack of funding, unequal education about the benefits of healthy foods, and varying consumer preferences were identified barriers in development of LFS. It is important to work towards motivating the community to not only maintain existing food system resources, but also to grow them. A culturally appropriate local food system that includes all groups addresses food insecurity, integrates environmental and economic sustainability, and incorporates downtown grocery stores, community gardens and farmers' markets is the ideal local food system, according to civil society representatives (Castellanos *et al.*, 2016)

According Bérard & Marchenay (2008) increased awareness of local heritage can serve as a starting point for initiatives to revive traditional products and make them profitable. A combination of factors, including historical depth, location, reputation, and know-how, distinguish traditionally regional products, especially in light of modern interest in identifying such foods.

## Recommendations for improvement local food system in North Macedonia

As shown above, it is evident that the local community needs to be strengthened. A country's local food system can be improved in many ways. Local food systems which are

mostly based on small and medium farms can be strengthened by purchasing their products, volunteering, or advocating for policies that benefit them. Educating consumers about the benefits of local food, such as its freshness, flavor, and environmental impact, can help to increase demand for local products and support the local food system. A good example of a good initiative in North Macedonia is Slow Food, an organization that has been working in the country for over 10 years to protect and promote authentic Macedonian foods. The association, Rural Coalition, also promoted the online platform "nasha tezga" as a source for fresh agricultural products. These initiatives show the commitment to preserving traditional Macedonian food and culture and to creating an accessible marketplace for local farmers. Develop farmers' markets and other direct-to-consumer sales channels could be one of the solutions that will help to connect consumers with local producers and promote the sale of locally grown foods. There is a need for investment in the infrastructure also. Storage facilities and processing plants can improve the efficiency of the local food system and facilitate the delivery of products to consumers. A final focus should be on reducing food waste in the country. Food waste reduction can help to ensure that more of the food produced locally is available for consumption, strengthening the local food system in the process.

Build short food supply chains locally, so that producers of different foods and feeds can cooperate in providing a complete local food system. Food producers can procure from local feed producers through a short food supply chain. Small feed producers in the area will benefit from this because they can have a market to sell their products. For local food producers, it will provide an additional argument that their food is genuinely local. In the long run, more local actors can be included in short food supply chains.

## CONCLUSIONS

North Macedonia needs to strengthen its capacity to implement and control quality schemes. In many regions of the world, support for local agriculture is emerging as an important issue in the flourishing local food movement as alternative marketing. The local food system in our country must have a definite form and structure that is actually rooted in a specific location, aimed at supporting local economic benefits and promoting social and environmental advantages, as well as providing significant support to local food businesses through a competitive strategy. Farmers should be encouraged for local food production and to participate in the development of the local short food chain. The state should support the promotion and marketing of local, traditional foods. In order to raise awareness about traditional foods among producers, consumers, and communities, a strong marketing campaign for home products is needed. Cooperation and coordination between relevant institutions should be improved.

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