

Patterns of rural development in mountainous area of Mediterranean: between tradition and innovation

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discuss how small farm business, located in marginal areas, re-adapt its marketing strategies and its production in order to meet a specific segment of the market. The process is linked to a wider development process that involve different actors and it is based on mobilization of local resources. Referring to the novelty concept we argue that novelties introduction in agriculture can be understood as an active re-patterning of resource use based on local knowledge and available resource. This is the case of a cheese making cooperative in the La Alpujarra region, south east of Spain.

KEYWORDS: less favoured areas; rural development, novelties, local food;

1. MARGINS IN MOVEMENT

Nowadays at academic level there is no clearly and commonly accepted definition of what marginal agriculture is. Perhaps the most commonly accepted definition of a marginal agricultural situation is one which is at the margin of economic viability. Agricultural marginalisation could be considered to be a process, driven by a combination of social, economic, political and environmental factors, by which certain areas of farmland cease to be viable under an existing land use and socio-economic structure. It may consist of a combination of intensification and extensification of land used agriculturally. Marginalisation takes a variety of forms and occurs at different scales, ranging from the individual patch of land to sizeable regions (Brouwer et al.,1997). Most commonly, at European level the concept of marginal agriculture it is often linked with concept of Less Favoured Area coined by the European Union during the seventies (EEC, 1975). The Directive 75/268 has been created in order to permit agriculture to be maintained in areas exposed to more difficult production conditions, with this act the EU recognized for the first time the necessity to do keep the agriculture in are areas which, for different reasons, such as a physical morphology and marginality of position, have been generating disadvantage in term of costs and possibilities, the Commission introduced a territorial dimension to these actions. The Community thus decided, for the first time, to grant direct aid to farmers so as to take account of structural and natural disparities, and, in particular, to compensate for permanent natural handicaps.

Since the 1975 the schema has been revised many times nevertheless the territorial concept of maintenance of the agriculture always remain at the core.

As Brouwer et al. (1997) argue, marginalisation of agriculture on European farms seems to be particularly visible in the less fertile and drier zones in the Mediterranean. In these regions there are large areas of agricultural land which is extensive and largely traditional in character and relatively well integrated with the natural environment. Livestock farming including beef, sheep and dairy are of major importance to nature conservation in these areas as well, as they manage most of the areas with high nature values. They may maintain viability of extensive farming systems and subsequently to prevent abandonment of agricultural land.

The case study presented that we are going to present is coming from of the highest part of a geographic region commonly called the *La Alpujarra* (Fig 1), situated in the south-east of Andalusia, Spain and classified as less favoured area. *La Alpujarra* region can be defined as historical and geographical region as the are have not administrative borders, their territory are divided under the province of Granada and Almeria, our case study is coming from the village of Vàlor situated in the Granada province. The La Alpujarra granadina is a mountainous area in South-Eastern Spain and a typical example of the transformation of the rural areas in the Mediterranean North shore. The *La Alpujarra* is made up of a series of mountain valleys and gorges and possesses large altitude gradients (practically from sea level to 3, 500 meters at Sierra Nevada summits), and steep inclines, which are one of the traditional impediments in the development of its farming systems. Irrigation systems, many of which date from the 15th century or earlier, are fed by streams and snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada summits and have permitted an intricate system of terraced agricultural land. Terraces support a polycultures which includes field crops, vegetables, tree crops and, at lower elevations, vines and olives. The typical way to cultivate in terrace, linked to this peculiar morphology, has been the main factor that has limited the process of modernization and mechanization of agriculture, that rapidly transformed the major part of Spanish rural areas during the 50's. Farming in the area has been gradually abandoned since the beginning of the rural exodus in the fifties. Demographic changes in the second half of this century have been quite dramatic.

Fig.1 *La Alpujarra, village of Berchules, 2008 and landscape from Vàlor village.*



Angela Guarino pictures (2008)

Most of the Alpujarran villages recorded population highs in 1950 and an exodus since then. Population decreases to around 50% since 1950, with rate approaching 4% per year between 1960 and 1975.

Migration has been directed toward other parts of Spain (Barcelona and Madrid) to provide employment in industry; in the tourism sector of the coastal strip of the Costa del

Sol (Málaga, South-Eastern Spain); and also into the areas of high agricultural productivity, particularly that of greenhouse horticulture along the Spanish Mediterranean coast. This migration has, as in other European mountain areas, had a measurable environmental impact. From these years the so called “rural exodus” became cause as well effect of the traditional production system in the sense that the lost of labour force and the progressive decline in social capital involved a fall of entrepreneur spirit and associational network. However, for the last twenty years it can be observed an attempt of revalorization of local production as well as promotion of rural tourism just in order to give response to the crisis. This is the temporal context when some associations and cooperatives were born and were we can observe a increasingly presence of foreigners that decided to move their residence in the area due to environmental, remoteness and climate reasons.

2. GROUNDING DATA

The body of study on Rural Development is highly characterised for the heterogeneity of their contributions in terms of multidisciplinary and methodologies of investigation. This research refers to qualitative methodology and reflect a background in rural sociology, is part of wider research on rural development in less favoured areas that aim to highlight some theory insight from the studies of practices. Following this objective we chose to following the grounded theory research approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), using multiple sources of evidence, which included informal talks, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Grounded theory can be describes as a series of tool and flexible guidelines that give to the researcher useful insight to direct the study without rigid prescriptions. We collected data during the winter 2007 and spring 2008.

3. NOVELTIES TOWARDS THE GOVERNANCE OF THE MARKET

Wiskerke and Van der Ploeg (2004) describe novelties as follows: ‘Novelties are located on the borderline that separates the known from the unknown. A novelty is something new: a new practice, a new insight, an unexpected but interesting result. It is a promising result, practice or insight. At the same time, novelties are, as yet, not fully understood. They are deviations from the rule. They do not correspond with knowledge accumulated so far – they defy, as it were, conventional understanding. Novelties go beyond existing and explained regularities’. Following this reasoning novelties are something not completely new but that contain some innovation that can be displayed in different form, they can concern with the mode of production, the product in itself or the way to re-organize and re-build the production through a process of interiorization creating what Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) call ‘contextual knowledge’. They distinguish it in four important processes of learning: *socialization*, *externalisation*, *recombination* and *internalization*. Novelties than can symbolize the *loci* were external and internal elements recombines creating some innovation that can meet the consumers demand. At this point governance of the market play a fundamental role. Indeed, often marginal agriculture is characterized for its economic marginalization that can be see also as the inability to reach a market, market governance is essential since it is related to the concept of increasing autonomy and power of small producers in order to reduce the vulnerability to external shocks.

3.1 Cheese Making in La Alpujarra region: the case of *Los Cortijuelos*

As we mentioned in the introduction, the squeeze of modernization and productivist shift marginalized a number of mountain livestock system in particular those based on rearing small ruminant. In spite of the crisis we can observe some attempts to re-localize and innovate local production in order to gain a chunk of the market in order to maintain and develop a local business.

This case study deals with the pathway that conduct the *Central Lechera Alpujarreña* (Alpujarran Milk Dairy Factory), a small cooperative located in the village of Válor that began utilizing EU funding in the late 1980s collecting the goat's milk of the area to the production of goat's cheese to open up new market for goat milk-based cheese, a product from the region that had never been commercialised before. After decades of adjustments to the ever-changing requirements of the market, the dairy today exports its cheese to Italy, Japan and Switzerland and is considering widening the range of cheeses produced.

The eastern Alpujarra had enjoyed a long tradition of goat's milk production as a secondary product, goats principally were reared for their meat and almost entirely bought by dealers or intermediaries, the cheese had only a local consumption (Sayadi and Calatrava, 2006).

At the end of 1980', doing to European Union subsidies, the number of goats experiment an increase in the Alpujarra region, under these circumstances, the problem of milk commercialization was evident because wasn't any demand for it.

Observing this situation, a group of 4 friends, originary from Válor, a goatherder and the other three people that moved to Granada, decide to constituting a small family business to collect and commercialize the goat's milk of the area.

In the 1988 the *Central Lechera Alpujarreña* was set up in Válor, a municipality formed by three small village that totaling 2431 inhabitants, with the mission to collect the milk of the area.

During the first year the CLA just produce and collect the goat's milk of the area to sell it a large dairy industry in Granada (130 km) that used it to make a cheese called "La flor de la Alpujarra" (the Alpujarra's flower) by mixing goat's milk with cow's milk coming from other part of the province.

Due excessive transport cost and low income for the goatherder in the 1990 they decided to start to made their one cheese and benefit themselves of the name and fame of the place. This stage faced different problem, on one hand how to respond a market demand and how to manage the area milk production capabilities, also they suffer a lack on knowledge of modern technologies that could be applied to the production of handicraft cheese.

One of the partner of the company decided to travel to Murcia and to Barcelona to see how they make goats cheese and started to make some experiments when went back to home. Finally they modernized the production system without abandoning the handicraft system, they keep the handicraft production restricting the use of machinery to the pasteurization process, they also play attentions to the aspect of the cheese and of the etiquette in order to produce a cheese that can meet the taste of an high bracket of consumers.

In the 1991, thanks to a funding contribution of LEADER I initiative, production and sale of cheese begins under the trademark Los Cortijuelos (the little farms) (Fig.2).

Fig.2. The entrance of the dairy farm in Valor and two of the cheeses product by the farm



Angela Guarino pictures (2008)

The market initially responds well and they were able to produce and sell 100.000 kg in one year, but with certain problems of slowness in accessing the market determinate accumulations of stock. This situation was also due to the ethics principle generated in the CLA's initial stage, they don't want to affect the goatherds of the area, decreasing the quantity of the milk purchased.

They start a search for new commercial channels, looking for gourmet segment of the chesses market thought associates sales networks (quality wine, etc..). During this expansion phase they decide to try to approach the large stores with a national-wide distribution, primarily in their urban stores on the region, also helped by a LEADER contribution to enhance their product presentation and labeling process.

During this last stage the company has reduced slightly its cheese production, due to the necessity of reducing stored stocks, contemporary, due to the slow decline of goatherders there has been a natural reduction in the area's milk production.

Finally they make important agreements with a national platform throw which they sell both to the main big retailers and to specialized gourmet food stores.

One of them introduced the cheese in their line product of high quality called "Productos de nuestra Tierra" which bring together gastronomic products coming from all Spain with guaranty of quality and provenience (100% made in Spain products).

Now they don't have anymore market problem and export their cheese in Italy, Japan and Switzerland. They are thinking to amply their variety of products during next years.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The case study show how through a process of innovation and adaptation a small local business can reach the governance the market. The company creates first a market for the goat's milk, than with a strategy based on the identity of the territory create a market for a new local product. An other aspect can be relevant to observe, the lack of young people interest in continuing the family goat-herding is it motivated by the lack of social prestige related to agricultural jobs. Due to the renovated identity that all the area is

experimenting, the prestige of goat herder enjoyed is increasing (Calatrava and Sayadi 2003). Perhaps, the existence of the CLA, in absence of any other initiative, such as co-operatives ones makes possible the maintenance of milk production in the area, and, consequently the well-being of goatherding, which besides constituting an important economic activity of the area, fulfills other function as contributing to the quality of the area's recreational offering, landscape, land use, and a balanced development process.

The CLA's strategy has been successful, they focusing to the production of a high quality cheese linking it to its place of origin, in order to meet a segment of demand that ask for this kind of products. They choose to make a cheese that was historically produced in the area, but never commercialized, they giving it an identity and making them compatible with sanitary rules and market's demand.

Moreover the maintenance of livestock in mountains contribute to environmental balance, the preservation of natural grazing zones and small surfaces dedicated to growing cereals or legumes for foraging are basic landscape component of the area.

The disappearance of goats in the area will affect economically the income family, socially, because the low opportunity of employment in the area, will contribute to the emigration, and environmentally has been studied that the presence of little flocks helps to maintain the ecological equilibrium of the area. Finally the consolidation of the brand *Los Cortijuelos* as a cheese made from goats coming from the Válor area inside the Alpujarra has been influencing the way in which goatsherder see themselves and how the other look at them. Even though the company is private entity, due to the fact that one of the owners is its self a goat herder increase the collaboration between them as a part of the chain. The production of goat-milk cheese in this marginal area seems to be ensuring benefits in terms of sustainable land use and landscape conservation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all people from the La Alpujarra region that have shared their time and their knowledge with me.

I would like to thank to my advisor, Gianluca Brunori from the University of Pisa for giving me always good directions and Samir Sayadi from the CIFA, Granada, for supporting my research in Andalusia, for his expert guidance and for his encouragement and support at all level.

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