

UNCTAD- Slow Foods Workshop on Voices from Rural Communities in LDCs

October 23-24, 2014; Turin, Italy



The UNCTAD- Slow Foods workshop, “Voices from rural communities in least developed countries: Promoting traditional food products and the territory through “made in” initiatives and geographical indications,” was held in Turin, Italy, on October 23-24, 2014, under the ambit of the Terra Madre Festival. The Workshop, supported by the Italian Government, Slow Foods, and UNCTAD, gathered Rural Communities producing traditional products from Bhutan, Cambodia Ethiopia, Italy, Laos, Mauritania, Senegal, Mozambique, and Madagascar. Representatives from the countries, from both government, and rural communities shared their experiences with exploring and implementing geographical indications (GI) regimes in their own countries, the challenges faced, and the benefits received. This exchange of experiences, and concerns underscored the significant role that geographical indications (GIs), and other trade laws for the protection and promotion of products of rural communities can play in income generation, as well as poverty reduction, and uplifting vulnerable groups, in developing countries.

The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) defines a geographical indication as “a sign used on goods that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities, a reputation or characteristics that are essentially attributable to that place of origin...Most commonly, a geographical indication includes the name of the place of origin of the goods. For example, agricultural products typically have qualities that derive from their place of production and are influenced by specific local factors, such as climate and soil.”¹ WIPO notes, “geographical indication’s reputation is a collective, intangible asset. If not protected, it could be used without

¹ Geographical Indications, World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) http://www.wipo.int/geo_indications/en/ (accessed December 6, 2014)

restriction and its value diminished and eventually lost.”² On the other hand, awarding a geographical indication to a product, specific to a community can have significant economic benefits to the economy as a whole, and particularly to the community involved in its production. “A geographical indication right enables those who have the right to use the indication to prevent its use by a third party whose product does not conform to the applicable standards.”³

To introduce the workshop, UNCTAD highlighted the role of trade as an engine of growth, especially for rural communities, which produce these traditional products. Therefore, this workshop was organised, to allow LDCs to share the state of play, their experiences, and lessons learnt in the area of GIs, and protection and promotion of traditional products of these communities.

One of the key observations during the workshop was that for most developing countries, agriculture is the backbone of the economy. While technological products traditionally find their way into international markets more easily, the same, however, cannot be said of agricultural and primary products, even though these sectors employ the majority of the populations in most developing and least developed countries. The workshop iterated that rural communities are the most vulnerable of all economic groups. In spite of efforts from donor countries, and international organisations, such as UNCTAD, not enough is being done in most LDCs to protect and promote the traditional (and artisanal) products of these communities. With restricted access to international markets, information, and credit/finance, the only way these rural communities can be competitive is through ‘niche’ products, with characteristics unique to the region of production.

It was emphasised that LDCs have the necessary culture, tradition, and biodiversity, which, if adequately protected and promoted, could add significantly to the value chains in these economies. At the same time, the vast biodiversity of most of these countries, together with the wild flora and fauna, result in some very interesting and unique native products, and production methods. Optimising access to, and harvesting of these native products and production methods can not only provide some very useful products for the communities, as well as for consumers across the world, but can also go a long way in eradicating poverty, uplifting women, and development of rural communities in these countries. Geographical indications are one such tool, which can provide protection, and promotion of traditional products in the international market, and benefit the communities associated with these products. Geographical indications are widely used and known in Europe and Italy to recognise and protect unique products with distinct favour and characteristics. Parmigiano reggiano of Italy is one such example.

The Workshop discussed how geographical indications can be used in LDCs to promote traditional products and protect them from counterfeiting. The benefits of geographical indications, both standalone, as well as *vis-a-vis* other methods of product protection and promotion were also discussed. It was noted that while instruments such as trademarks and patents offer protection to individual producers of the products, geographical indications belong to the community as a whole, and benefit a wider audience, allowing the entire community or region to gain from the protection and branding, in turn, offering a wider opportunity for the economy as a whole. Geographical indications also afford a unique branding position to the products, which gain visibility along with reputation and recognition. Consumers are willing to pay a much higher price for products with a link

² Geographical Indications, World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) http://www.wipo.int/geo_indications/en/ (accessed December 6, 2014)

³ *ibid*

to a specific region or environment in LDCs also taking into account of their pristine environment. In effect, GIs have the potential, if utilised optimally, to lead to higher prices for traditional products of rural communities, as well as to aide in the expansion and diversification of markets for these products. This could lead in turn to a growth of production, incentives for better quality of output, and to uplifting the communities producing these products. Therefore, these niche products if adequately promoted may provide significant returns to rural communities with a significant impact on poverty reduction.

The workshop witnessed participation from both, potential beneficiaries of knowledge and support, as well as organisations, and communities, with the skill and ability to support and forward initiatives in LDCs.

Paolo deCroce of Slow Foods, an organisation which routinely supports food producers in developing and least developed countries, noted that the end objective of the Terra Madre event was effectively the same as the objective that geographical indications seek to fulfil, to provide value and dignity to local farmers. He also iterated the need to protect the territory, in addition to the products, since the territory itself is related to culture and identity. He noted that the key to the development of rural communities is to eat and to sell good, clean, fair products, and to convert local foods into a global success story.

Dr. Giuseppe Sallemi of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry also echoed these sentiments. He underscored the commitment of the Ministry to promote and protect local products handed down generations. Giuseppe Falla of the FARO Cooperative discussed the example of the tomatoes produced by the cooperative. He noted that the two key values at the Cooperative were good agricultural practice, and a high quality of life. He also discussed the challenges faced by the Cooperative in its initial stages, with the parochial mindset, and small and marginal farms, low on structure and income. He noted that what turned things around for the Cooperative, and the community, was that the government realised the importance of investing in local produce, and agriculture, and the local communities realised the importance of understanding international customs. He also discussed the benefits of setting up a consortium within the community to fight counterfeiting, and warehouse cooperatives for tracking the process from production, through delivery, to final sales.

Representations from each of the communities from participating countries had the opportunity to present their own case studies, their experiences with implementing geographical indications in their own regions.

Maurizio Cancelli, representing the agrarian community of *Cancelli*, underscored the significance of protecting the region, and the importance of the bond within the community from a particular region., to ensure that migration, if at all, was voluntary, and people were not forced out of their territory for lack of opportunity. He also underscored the need to source raw materials, seeds, fertilisers etc. locally, and to focus efforts on the quality of production.

The representation from Cambodia presented the popular case of *Kampot Pepper*, distinguished by its uniqueness of pungency and flavour. They discussed the necessary ground work required to implement a geographical indications, the challenges, and the benefits to the community since the award of the geographical indication. They iterated that it was essential to understand the region, the climate, the soil conditions, and delimit them from neighbouring areas. At the same time, they

cautioned that it was necessary, while delimiting the geographical reach of the indication, to ensure that neighbouring communities, who may have historically sold similar products, were not alienated in the process. The producers of Kampot Pepper also noted the essence of setting up impartial control systems, to help build consumer confidence, and to meet quality regulations. They underscored that simply adopting a regulation on geographical indications would not be sufficient. Effective implementation was key. They also highlighted the benefits of the regime. For one, consumers were willing to pay a higher price for a product with distinctive characteristics particular to special regions, and communities. As a result, Kampot Pepper prices, they said, had increased up to three times since the geographical indication was awarded to the product. They also noted that the geographical indication had allowed producers access to wider, more diversified markets.



Another representation from Cambodia presented the case of the *blue swimming crab* of Cambodia, from the perspective of an assessment system introduced by the administration in order to improve the resuscitation of natural resources. They sought assistance with addressing issues of finance, technical capacity, and illegal fishing by neighbouring communities.

A representation from Madagascar presented the case of the geographical indication of *pink and white rice (Vary Malaady and Rojofotsy)*. They explained the distinguishing characteristics of rice varieties, by weight, and fibre content, among others. They discussed the need for administrative action in protecting and promoting local rice varieties in Madagascar. They noted that the community was in the process of learning more about geographical indications, and that there was a need to increase awareness about the benefits of geographical indications within rural communities.

They also shared the challenges they were facing in spreading awareness, as well as in identifying the distinguishing characteristics of the rice varieties.



The representation from Mozambique discussed the example of locally harvested *white prawns*. They noted that the community harvesting these prawns were relatively poorer, and stood to benefit immensely from the award of a geographical indication. They indicated that the process of establishing the necessary regulation for geographical indications was already underway, but the pace of these changes was very slow. As a matter of fact, the legal framework required to submit for geographical indications was in place since 2006, and no actual submissions had been made, as on the day of the workshop. The representation underscored that some of the key challenges they faced were in identifying the products which could qualify for a geographical indication awards, maintaining a certain quality of production, value chain integration, expanding on the number of products covered by geographical indications, weak internal governance, slow administrative process, the lack of adequate quality testing facilities, and personnel etc. Another roadblock identified was the absence of an association of producers, implying that the producers were scattered, and not unified by a single association of internal governance.



The women from the *Imraguen Community* of fisherwomen from Mauritania discussed how these communities have a high stake in the optimal harvesting of rural and traditional production, as well as from protection and promotion of these products. No economy can embark on the path of development unless women can harvest benefits of growth, particularly in rural communities. The workshop underscored how geographical indications can be a means to allowing women in these

communities, who have a high stake in rural and traditional production and harvesting, to benefit greatly from promotion, and protection, with the help of branding exercises. The representation of fisherwomen from Mauritania reiterated this point. In a country with a 700m Atlantic coastline, the waters of Mauritania are rich in fish. The women of the Imraguen community are roaming fisherwomen, who follow the schools of fish along the coast, and harvest these schools. In spite of the rich marine life, and the high nutritional value of Mullet, the variety of fish specific to the region, poor access to facilities, such as infrastructure makes it difficult for these women to market quality production. Further to their previous participation at Terra Madre, the *Mullet* producing fisherwomen of this community have organised themselves into a large group to promote and improve their technical and organisational skills, and to create enabling conditions for the production of a top quality product, and to promote fair trade. They, however, also iterated the continued challenges of access to credit lines, and the ability to effectively market the product. In conclusion, they underscored that their immediate next objective would be to apply for the award of a geographical indication.

The producers of Ethiopian *Harennna Forest Wild Coffee* also presented their story, a wild grown coffee, which did not require washing after harvesting. They highlighted the key challenges they faced due to the limited storage facilities; lack of access to finance and credit; lack of own vehicles for transportation of the harvested coffee; limited supply of export standard quality coffee; limited export market (only Italy); seasonality of access to hulling machines coffee beans,' and limited capacity to acquire such machines; limited coffee cleaning machines; poor infrastructure; inadequate information; lack of awareness on export standard requirements, branding etc. The representation highlighted the significant role that the cooperative unions, supported by Slow Foods, were playing in promoting the products, and in lending transparency to their movement. Slow Foods, they said, was also helping them with training; acquiring suspension nets (to dry the coffee), promotion of the coffee in local and in international markets, new commercial outlets for the associations, and the permission to use the *Slow Foods Prestida* logo on the final product.

The delegation from Bhutan discussed the case of the locally produced *red rice*, which had a distinctive flavour, and high nutritive value, and fetched a higher price even within Bhutan. They underscored the challenge of the poor technical know how in Bhutan on the fundamentals of geographical indications, and the absence of any necessary legislation, or regulatory framework required to implement geographical indications. They also iterated the challenges in identifying the products, and specific varieties, and in meeting demands of quantity and quality on the international market.



The *coffee* producers of Laos also shared their experiences, and the support they had received from organisations such as PAFO, and DAFO, and well as from the private sector. They also discussed the need for assistance on certification, processing, packaging, and branding exercises, to promote their products.

The *Madd juice* and preserves producers from the Casamance region of Senegal spoke about their experience with the artisanal units producing the fruit juices and preserves. They highlighted the challenges faced by these units, in the absence of adequate infrastructure, and without the knowledge required to initiate protection of endangered species, securing access to markets. They also discussed that effective promotion and protection of the product would especially benefit the women of the community, who were directly involved in the processing the products. They noted that the decision to submit the product for the award of a geographical indication was made in November 2012, and they were awaiting further action.

The experts on the subject, and the community representatives also shared information on the conditions and requirements to register geographical indications. It was noted that identifying products, and their specific varieties, which could be registered as GIs was the first step. The significance of linking the product to the specific region through unique characteristics was emphasised as step 2. It was also stressed that a regulatory framework, which could support geographical indications must be put in place in each of the participating LDCs. However, simply establishing a regulatory framework would not be sufficient. Effective implementation of these

regulations, and spreading awareness on the subject, especially among the rural communities, would be key.

The workshop shed light on the common challenges faced by the rural communities, globally. It was noted that access to information, credit and finance, was one of the key roadblocks. Another area of concerns was the lack of necessary infrastructure, and logistical support for the storage, transport, processing, packaging, branding, and quality certification of the products. The missing link with the necessary technical skills, and knowledge in the area was also underscored, both for producers, as well as for government officials. Another key challenge identified was the coordination of the different stakeholders in the process, and gathering rural producers into unions/consortia.



To address these gaps, and facilitate the geographical indications process in LDCs, the international community, and organisations such as UNCTAD offered their support. It was reiterated that the idea of events such as Terra Madre, and the workshops within, was to give value and dignity to products of rural communities, and the farmers and producers therein. There was a genuine intent, and effort to save what was precious to each country, and it must be grasped. However, protection and promotion start at home, and spreading awareness locally would be the first step.

The workshop underscored that while the common denominator of all countries participating was that they were LDCs from Asia and Africa, there were marked differences in the state of play on geographical indications in these countries, as well as on the routes taken by different rural communities in these countries in promoting their products.

However, all participants shared an evident enthusiasm and support for geographical indications, and for promoting products of rural communities. This enthusiasm was further reinforced by sharing experiences and lessons learnt, during the two day workshop, and by understanding that the problems and challenges faced by different communities were largely similar. The urgency to address them at the national level, while acknowledging that no community was alone in its endeavour to protect and promote its local, traditional and artisanal products, was emphasised.

At the end of the workshop, participants from LDCs shared their experience of the workshop, and the benefits they received from the event. Participants of the workshop iterated that exchanging stories of their experiences with GIs had not only allowed them to understand new ways of utilising the tool, and overcoming challenges, but also highlighted the fact that even though each community had its own story, and its own products, they all had similar challenges, and similar experiences, and they felt a sense of being one community in the pursuit of uplifting rural communities, and the fight against poverty, with GIs as a key instrument at their disposal.

In conclusion, the success of the workshop resonated among the participants, who underscored that the workshop had been an enriching experience, with several key lessons , including the common understanding that the workshop itself was not an end. In fact, it would mark the beginning of a reinforced commitment to structuring and implementing protection and promotional strategies for products of rural communities, as a first step in the long journey of LDCs leveraging on geographical indications for uplifting rural communities, and eradicating poverty, towards the development of their economies, as a whole. Participants expressed their keen desire to benefit from available support from organisations such as UNCTAD, and Slow Foods, and an enthusiasm to push forward on the subject, with full force, without further delay.