

Collective marketing initiatives: an association of material, identity and organizational conditions of territory. The case of “Fin Gras du Mézenc”

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Key words: *territory, collective initiative, “Fin Gras du Mézenc”*

1. *Introduction*

Auvergne constitutes the “biggest pasture of France” but also the first regional producer of beef meat, with 12 % of the French bovine livestock. With 62 % of medium mountain area, grass constitutes the basis of cattle feeding with pasture and hay, and confers quality and particular tenderness to the meat (Hocquette *et al.*, 2005). In order to maintain a production based on grass and to market and promote their products, some livestock farmers choose to coordinate themselves. Several studies show the importance of this collective dimension on commercialization initiatives, analyzing the association of territory and meat sector stakeholders (Mormont, 2001). Considering the importance of these collective initiatives, this paper aims at identifying the determinants of their emergence and development.

Several authors have already tried to determine these factors by developing fragmented approaches. For some of them, the nature of relations within social networks is the explanatory factor of collective initiatives development (Markelova *et al.*, 2009, Kanemasu *et al.*, 2009). The natural capital through territorial resources also seems to play a role in the development of collective initiatives (Megyesi *et al.*, 2010). Other authors focus on practices and actors coordination by analyzing the role of governance and geographical and organizational proximity (Torre, Beuret, 2012). Finally, results from the COFAMI project show that the development of collective initiatives is linked with the context and also with various factors of interdependent territories. Therefore, these fragmented approaches are not sufficient to identify the whole territorial components that impact on the development of collective initiatives. That is why the objective of this paper is to provide an integrated analysis framework of the territory, illustrated with a case study.

The following article is organized in four parts. First, we present our

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analysis framework, considering the territory as a system composed of three dimensions; each of them consists in interactive territorial conditions. The second section concerns the case study of “Fin Gras du Mézenc PDO” which is a collective marketing initiative of beef meat, and describes our methodology. The third part deals with the results, showing which elements of Mézenc territory lead or not to the development of this collective initiative. Finally, we will discuss these results and conclude.

2. *Systemic analysis framework: three facets of the territory*

Knowing that territory is permanently under construction and depends of numerous interactive factors, our analysis framework is based on a systemic approach of the territory, developed by Le Berre (1995) and refined by Moine (2006). According to these authors and also to Schwarz (1996), a territory has three facets: material, identity or symbolic and organizational. Each dimension is composed of territorial conditions that negatively or positively impact on the development of collective initiatives (Fig. 1).

2.1. *Material dimension* – According to Schwarz (1996), territory is made up of a set of places with their own properties. The material facet of a territory makes reference to two territorial conditions linked with collective initiatives: resources and geographical proximities. Territory is source of resources (Muchnik *et al.*, 2008), which are the means an individual or a group use to carry out an action (Gumuchian, Pecqueur, 2007). They are different types: natural (physical, biological), material, human, social, financial, institutional, political and also cultural. There is a distance among these resources, a geographical proximity considered as neutral at first, but that can be activated by men’s deeds (Torre, Beuret, 2012). In a territory, specific resources become a tool of differentiation and territorial identity through a collective dynamic of appropriation by stakeholders (François *et al.*, 2006). Considering resources as a basis for action, we are going to observe how their distribution and proximities can impact on the development of collective initiatives.

2.2. *Identity dimension* – To analyze how these two territorial conditions are taken into account by actors, we have to make reference to the identity facet of a territory which corresponds to perceptions and representations that actors make out of the space in which they evolve through ideas, images, symbols or memories (Di Méo, Buléon, 2005). Due to these representations, the individual or the group develops relations with the territory, which arouse two territorial conditions: territoriality and territorial identity (Lévy, Lussault, 2003).

Territoriality is formed through territories gathering that instills in the individual a sense of belonging, “to be from here” (Di Méo, Buléon, 2005). These territories are constituted with various networking preferential places that involve on values and meanings. Beyond the feeling of belonging, individuals and groups may also develop a sense of appropriation, as in “this space is mine; it is my land, my area”; territory takes on a symbolic dimension. With these two feelings, belonging and appropriation, actors

create a collective identity that is specific to a territory. This territorial identity evolves through actions carried out on the territory by the community (Pollice, 2003). By taking possession of a territory, a community develops its territorial identity and gives this territory a name, limits and a history (Laganier *et al.*, 2002). Representations, on which territoriality and territorial identity are established, influence decision-making and consequently impacts on actors' actions and organization.

2.3. Organizational dimension – This third dimension refers to the links and actions that actors collectively set up in order to convert and manage their territory. There are three principal territorial conditions; the first is social network, constituted by relations between actors. Indeed, the 'collectiv is made of various actors who, depending on their roles, their statuses and their strategies, are going to act and get involved within groups. The development of initiatives depends on the nature of the links they maintain. Beyond these relations, organization tools enable coordination between actors such as processes and plans of governance. They can be multi-actors and multi-levels. Governance seems to influence development of collective initiatives, as it is considered as a steering tool that facilitates decision-making and project construction. The last territorial condition corresponds to organizational proximity or how close individuals are otherwise than geographically, through their relations and interactions for example. According to Gilly and Torre (2000), organizational proximity depends on two logics: belongings and similarities. The first logic refers to the membership of several actors in a same network who will then develop direct relations. The logic of similarities stands for individuals who have mutual references, standards and values. These similarities can facilitate the development of relations. These three dimensions or conditions relate the organization and coordination potential on a territory.

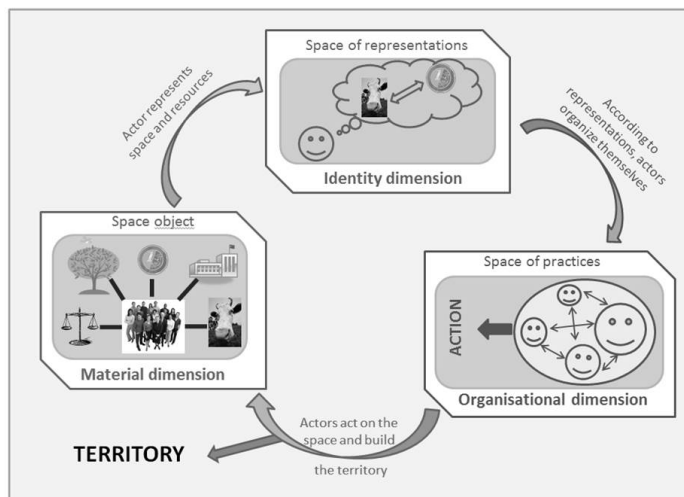


Fig. 1 - Systemic approach of the territory.

Source: Author's elaboration.

3. Case study and method. Fin Gras du Mézenc PDO

The Fin Gras is a beef produced with bullock (30 months old minimum) or heifers (24 months old minimum) fed with hay and grass on the Mézenc's territory. During the last winter these animals are fattened with locally produced mountain hay. This particularity gives the product quality, originality and seasonality. That's why this beef obtained an AOC (Protected designation of origin) in 2006 and an AOP, the European equivalent in 2013. Since 1995, the starting point of this collective marketing initiative, the produced volumes increased gradually from 50 animals the first year to 650 in 2013. Of course, this dynamic goes hand in hand with the increasing number of producers and butchers that got engaged in this initiative.

3.1. *Method: a qualitative approach* – In order to collect information linked with networks, territorial identity, spatial particularities or the reasons to the implementation of collective initiative on this territory, we used semi-directive interviews. It was targeted on the scale of collective initiatives territory, in the massif of Mézenc. The semi-directive interviews were carried out with various actors of the political, technical, commercial, agricultural and associative spheres. Then, thanks to a speech analysis and to the network reconstruction, we were able to highlight what may promote or limit the development of a collective initiative of beef promotion within the territory (Fig. 2).

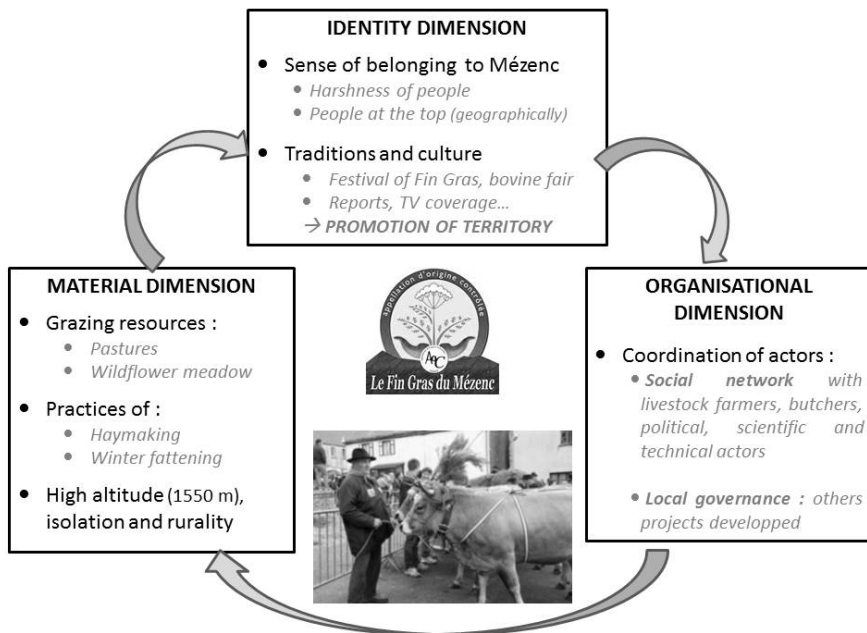


Fig. 2 - Territorial conditions of Mézenc on the base of Fin Gras PDO.

Source: Author's elaboration.

4. *Results*

During interviews with actors, they first of all underlined the role of oxen's fattening tradition during Easter in the implementation of this initiative. Indeed in the past, old working oxen were kept on the farm to be fattened during winter and sold in spring to butchers in bovine fairs. This tradition decreased during the years of agriculturs mechanization but in the 1990s, during another bovine crisis, an association with patrimonial vocation tried to maintain the agriculture in the territory as this activity guaranteed rural dynamic and development. They proved that the Massif of Mézenc distinguished itself through a particular agricultural activity: the fattening of oxen for Easter, which was necessary to improve the producers' income. Indeed, the sales price of Fin Gras were higher than others, generating an added value for the producers of Fin Gras but also for the others, who benefit from the fame of these animals. Thus we can say that the identity dimension through tradition and culture was the starting point of this initiative, also strongly correlated with physical and natural conditions of this area, the material facet of the territory.

The characteristics of fat oxen production are the results of particular conditions like high altitude, high quality of grazing resources and specific know-how. Reaching an average height of 1.100 meters, Mézenc presents a specific agrarian structure which André Fel (1962) considers as "grazier-pastoral", because there is an association of pastures and wildflower meadows. Due to the harshness of the climate, in particular winter snow coverage, it is necessary to set up resources management to ensure livestock feed during six or seven months of winter; that's why farmers have developed haymaking practices. Thanks to the Mediterranean climatic influences, farmers can mow meadows and dry the hay outside. This know-how, associated with a high quality of wildflower meadow, gives specific hay with which Fin Gras animals are fattening during at least 110 days, that is where its original taste comes from. This production is thus an adaptation to the environment and more particularly to material conditions of the territory such as altitude and harsh climate. These may impact on inhabitants' lifestyle by generating feelings of isolation and strong rurality, for example.

During the exchanges with members of the AOC Fin Gras, they highlighted their sense of belonging to the Massif of Mézenc. They have developed their own identity mainly based on the harshness due to the climate, the geographical isolation and the stubbornness of people. It is an element of identity recognition they like to show and carry on; it is also a condition of membership or exclusion. This sense of belonging is shared with butchers; some of them having settled on the Mézenc and others being natives. This mutual identity makes actors of the territory feel close to each other and creates relations between them.

These relations are at the very heart of the organizational dimension and more particularly of the social network made up of various actors and

organizations belonging to four spheres: political, technical, territorial and meat industry. Together, they have built this action by mobilizing skills from each actor. The strength of this initiative is based on the fact that actors create partnerships within the territory but also beyond, in order to have access to missing knowledge, so that all actors can put their know-how together for the benefit of the collective. First arrived in the sector, producers and butchers have shared their know-how to produce and propose the best meat for consumers. Between them, relations of trust were developed during the times of animal's selection, negotiations or meetings. Between farmers themselves, there was an evolution in the relations since belonging to the same cooperative helped them develop their organizational proximity. They know each other and share common values. Around the meat sector, others actors have contribute to the Fin Gras PDO like territorial collectivities who played a financial role but also a moral support while believing in this initiative. The technical institutes allowed the concretization of this project and the PDO (protected designation of origin) certification, as they promoted the product and the links between bovine meat and territory. Furthermore, nothing would have occurred without the mobilization of the patrimonial association. Also, they had the opportunity to hire a technician especially for this initiative, who plays the coordinator's role within the network and guarantees regular information exchanges. All actors are currently essential for this initiative sustainability and the promotion actions.

At this time there are three manifestations around the Fin Gras: the festival which seals the end of the production season, and two traditional bovine fairs where breeders bring their animals and compare them to others. These manifestations mark the success of the coordination as actors from the meat sector and from the territory work together to promote their products, their culture and their heritage.

5. *Conclusion*

The study on Fin Gras du Mézenc shows that each dimension of a territory plays a significant role in the development of collective initiative. Regarding the material dimension, high altitude and climate give these particular natural resources. The two most important characteristics of this territory are the grazing resources composed by pastures covered with an abundant and rich flora; and the know-how in haymaking and oxen fattening. These resources and skills are the result of a notable culture and traditions that constitute the identity of Mézenc. Affected by snowfall during long winters, the inhabitants of this territory have learned to handle harshness, the reason for their sense of belonging. This strong aspect has helped them to bring their project to a successful conclusion despite the difficulties concerning the PDO certification.

Concerning the organizational dimension, we noticed that the central stakeholders quickly succeeded to surround themselves with technical, commercial and political skills, so as to assure the initiative development.

They have created a structured network in which they share a common vision for the future. Actors have transformed the territorial challenges like climatic harshness and grazing resources into an original project based on a high quality of meat, a sense of belonging and a structured network.

These results highlight the interdependence between territorial conditions in these three dimensions and the interest of using an integrated or systemic analysis framework. Because of its dynamic nature, our analysis framework allows to consider all territorial conditions as well as their interactions.

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Iniziativa di marketing collettivo: un'associazione tra materia, identità e condizioni organizzative del territorio. Il caso del "Fin Gras du Mézenc"

La ricerca analizza i fattori che influenzano le iniziative di commercializzazione e promozione della carne bovina per il mantenimento dell'allevamento e lo sviluppo del territorio nel contesto della regione Auvergne (Francia). Nello specifico, ci domandiamo quali siano le condizioni a livello territoriale che favoriscano l'emergenza e lo sviluppo di un progetto collettivo di valorizzazione della carne bovina. A tal scopo, proponiamo un'analisi del sistema territorio in tre diverse dimensioni: quella materiale, quella ideale e quella organizzativa. Il caso di studio a cui abbiamo applicato l'analisi è quello del progetto "Fin Gras du Mézenc" che ha ottenuto nel 2013 l'Indicazione Geografica Protetta (IGP). I risultati ottenuti evidenziano il ruolo di alcune caratteristiche del territorio e le interazioni delle.

Initiatives collectives de commercialisation: une association entre matière, identité et conditions d'organisation d'un territoire. Le cas de la "Fin Gras du Mézenc"

Dans le contexte Auvergnat où les initiatives collectives de commercialisation et promotion de la viande bovine constituent une voie pour le maintien de l'activité d'élevage et le développement du territoire; notre communication porte sur les déterminants de celles-ci. Plus précisément, nous interrogeons les conditions territoriales de l'émergence et du développement d'une initiative collective de valorisation de la viande bovine. Pour cela, nous proposons dans cet article un cadre d'analyse systémique du territoire, composé de trois dimensions en interaction: matérielle, idéale et organisationnelle. Nous illustrons cette approche avec une étude de cas, l'initiative collective du Fin Gras du Mézenc, ayant obtenue en 2013 une appellation d'origine protégée (AOP). Les résultats obtenus mettent en évidence le rôle favorable de différentes conditions territoriales ainsi que leurs interdépendances.