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The potential of Geographical Indications (GI) to enhance Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in Japan, with GI Mishima Bareisho potato as a case study

J. Kimura. & C. Rigolot¹

Abstract – Geographical indications (GIs) have recently become an important tool for Japanese agricultural policy, particularly after the adoption of a “sui generis” certification system in 2015. In the same year, the United Nations proposed a common agenda with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The present paper addresses the potential of GIs to enhance SDGs in Japan. First, we examine existing knowledge on GI inception, which consists in both government reports and research surveys. We show that these studies mostly focus on SDGs related to economic growth, and on social issues raised by the registration process. Then, as an exploration of potential impacts of GIs on the full set of SDGs, we study the case of Mishima Bareisho Potato GI, on the basis of interviews and participatory observation. From local stakeholders’ point of view, Mishima Potato GI can contribute to at least nine SDGs at all the production, transformation and commercialization stages. The SDG framework is useful to reveal some contributions seldomly considered in GI studies but which matter for local people, for example, the employment of disabled people or nutritional education. Finally, we discuss how these new insights can contribute to the debate on the potential role and limits of GIs for sustainable development in Japan.

Keywords – Geographical indication; Sustainable development goals; Rural development.

INTRODUCTION

Geographical indications (GIs) have recently become an important tool for Japanese agricultural policy, particularly after the adoption of a “sui generis” certification system in 2015 (Kimura, 2019). In March 2022, 120 agriproducts and foodstuff are registered as Japan GIs. This rush is partly due to the EU-Japan Economic Partner Agreement (EPA) validated in February 2020 where GI products are to be mutually protected, and partly because just like South European countries, Japan has diversity in agriproducts and foodstuff thanks to various geographical features and food cultures (Bestor, 2014; Kimura, 2019).

In 2015, the United Nations proposed a common agenda with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), integrating the economic, ecological and social dimensions of sustainable development (Caron et al., 2018). This research addresses the potential of GIs to enhance SDGs in Japan. First, we examine existing knowledge on GI inception in Japan, which consists in both government reports and research

surveys. Government reports emphasize indicators such as the elimination of counterfeit products, expansion of transactions and price increase. This correspond mostly to SDGs related to economic growth. Academic research surveys have investigated social issues raised by the GI registration process. For example, studies show how social networks can generate different pathways in the creation of new GIs, sometimes associated with important controversies (Sekine and Bonanno, 2017). Some authors have also highlighted the gap between stakeholder’s expectations and the observed effects before and after GI registration (Tashiro et al., 2018). However, we found no study proposing a comprehensive sustainability investigation of GI inception in Japan yet, explicitly considering the full set of SDGs.

METHODOLOGY

Then, as an exploration, we study the case of Mishima Bareisho Potato in Shizuoka prefecture, which was registered in October, 2016. From 2016 to 2018, just before and after the GI registration, one of the authors visited the production area four times and 19 key stakeholders have been interviewed with participatory observation of their works. These include (i) farmers and one fruit and vegetable market; (ii) One processing company and two retail stores; (iii) four local institutions (Japan Agricultural Cooperative (JA), the Mishima municipality, the Mishima Tourism Association, the Mishima Chamber of Commerce and Industry); (iv) four restaurants and cafés. Interviews were semi structured, with questions covering all aspects of Mishima potato and GI certification value creation by stakeholders’ activities. As a first step for the analysis, networks and interactions between stakeholders have been characterized and mapped. Then, the SDG framework has been used for interpretation, to identify all potential contributions of Mishima potato GI to sustainability of product origin, at the production, transformation and commercialization stages (Kimura and Rigolot, 2021).

RESULTS

On this basis, the analysis shows that Mishima Bareisho potato GI can contribute to at least nine SDGs; No Poverty(#1); Good health and well-

being(#3); Quality Education(#4); Gender Equality(#5); Affordable and clean energy(#7); Decent work and economic growth(#8); Responsible Consumption and production(#12); Biodiversity(#15); and Partnerships(#17). For example, at the production stage, educational farms for school children are developed; GI registration encourages young farmers, and the employment of women and disabled people. At the transformation stage, the processing company which produces Mishima croquettes employs local people. By purchasing B-class potatoes without lowering the price from the farmers, it contributes to economical support for the farmers. At the commercialization stages, the local restaurants offer menu with Mishima croquette, and Mishima municipality held the National Croquette Contest which are attracting tourists to visit the region. Healthy and environment-friendly practices are encouraged, i.e. development of new non-fried products, zero waste, zero kilometers, which are only possible with collaborative activities among stakeholders (Kimura and Rigolot, 2021).

DISCUSSION

As a conclusion, the Mishima Bareisho potato case study illustrates how the close connections of GI products to their local environment (natural and socio-cultural) can translate into positive contributions to several SDGs. However, it should be easily understood that not all certified Japanese GIs contribute similarly to SDGs. As regard the social dimension of sustainability, the creation of GIs has rather generated tensions and conflicts between stakeholders (Sekine and Bonanno, 2017), to the extent that one GI registration has even been cancelled (matcha tea). From an environmental perspective, GI registration might reinforce unsustainable systems such as landless beef production based on large amounts of imported feed (Augustin-Jean and Sekine, 2012). To better understand trade-offs, it would be interesting to combine the SDG framework with integrated assessment tools (Arfini and Bellassen, 2019) and more dynamic transition theories (Belmin et al., 2015).

To enhance the potential of GIs (in synergy with other agricultural policies), the SDG framework can be considered as a useful tool to support decision-making and governance and to align local action with global priorities. In conclusion, the positive links observed with SDGs in the Mishima Bareisho potato case study indicate that the stakeholders should work together to revitalize the community while maintaining the spirit of the commons, as developed elsewhere by Castello et al. (2022). It is important to regard the products as unique common goods of the community, and to engage in activities that give residents joy and make them want to live in Mishima, rather than mere products sales promotion (Kimura, 2019).

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