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The Sustainable Turn and Norwegian GIs

Atle Wehn Hegnes¹

Abstract – In July 2002, Norwegian regulations for Geographical Indications of foodstuff entered into force in accordance with EU regulations. At that time, there was a lack of both a common vocabulary and Norwegian food-cultural know-how in line with the food-cultural preconditions that formed the basis for the scheme in the EU. Since this introduction, these food cultural conditions led to significant adaptation work to adapt the GI schemes to Norwegian food culture, and Norwegian food culture to the schemes. Sustainability demands have increased over the last decades, requiring new adaptations related to GIs. This paper examines how to describe and understand this development from a social practice theory perspective.

Keywords – Norway, Sustainability, Practice theory

INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of the 1980s, Norwegian authorities and other key agri-food stakeholders started mobilizing what came to be described as *mental border protection* (Hegnes and Amilien, 2019). Simply put, the strategy aimed to trigger new ways of understanding food and to convince Norwegian consumers to choose Norwegian products. This Norwegian top-down turn to new qualities coincided with a growing turn to new qualities in Europe, characterized by a bottom-up initiative by consumers, retailers, and producers away from standardized products towards alternative qualities (Goodman, 2003). In line with the new strategy, the Norwegian regulations for GIs entered into force in accordance with EU regulations in July 2002.

In Norway, there was lack of both a common vocabulary and food-cultural know-how in line with the food-cultural preconditions that form the basis for the GIs for food in the EU. Since their introduction, these regulations have resulted in significant food cultural adaptation work to adapt the scheme to Norwegian food culture, and Norwegian food culture to the scheme. The actors' work with adaptations of meaning, social organization, and materiality, during implementation, administration, and use of the Norwegian scheme for GIs thus became important in the entrenchment of the scheme (Hegnes, 2019).

During the last decade, expectations have increased related to sustainability certification in the agri-food sector. However, the number of schemes and the complexity of standards presents a challenge with respect to which sustainability objectives are targeted. A consequence of this complexity is a demand for simplification and harmonization of standards. For example, in an ideal situation from the supplier's point of view, one would only need to comply with one set of criteria to meet all government and proprietor-based standards (Richards et al., 2013:238). Recently, the European Green Deal, and

more specifically the Farm to Fork strategy, stresses this importance of sustainable practices in all sectors and levels of the food chain (EC, 2020). The labelling policy within the EU in general is also important in this concern.

Sustainability is an integrated part of several Norwegian (private and governmental) certification schemes for food. However, these certifications are rarely explicitly understood or communicated as tools to cope with sustainability challenges. In this short paper, the role of GIs in the turn toward sustainability is proposed to be understood through the analytical and conceptual framework of social practice theory (SPT).

METHOD AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

At this preliminary stage, the method is based on existing literature and forms a background for data collection to be conducted in Norway during the spring/summer 2022. Norwegian materials (with GI examples from apple production) will be used to explore and shed light on the debate on GIs *versus* sustainability standards. This debate is characterized by balancing advantages and drawbacks of two challenging strategies: 1) a convergence strategy, implying inclusion of sustainability goals in GI certification, and 2) a distinction strategy, focusing GI certification on place-based specificity on one hand and sustainability standards on the other hand. More specifically, the following research question will be probed: *How do different actors understand, practice, and adapt the nexus of place-based specificity and sustainability qualities in GIs, and what consequences does this dynamic bring?*

SUSTAINABILITY AND GIs

Despite a largely shared understanding of the crucial need for a sustainable turn, sustainability is still a multidimensional concept encompassing several matters and interests. During the last decade, a vast number of studies have offered detailed accounts of how GIs are related to various dimensions of sustainability, including environmental (e.g., Owen et al., 2020), economic (e.g., Vandecastelaere et al., 2020), social (e.g., Muller et al., 2021), and in combination (Bellassen et al., 2022). There are also examples of analysis of the Norwegian scheme from a sustainability perspective (Amilien, Vittersø, and Tangeland, 2019).

Even though there have been recent advances in describing and understanding GIs from a sustainabil-

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ity perspective, there are still important questions associated with how people generally understand and adapt their GI practices to sustainable measures.

ADAPTING NORWEGIAN GIS TO SUSTAINABILITY

Inspired by recent developments in SPT, analysis of cases of Norwegian apple GIs will be informed by Theodore Schatzki's conceptual framework and cases on Shaker herb practice (2002) and Kentucky bourbon (2019). The analysis will apply the concepts of *general understandings* (Schatzki, 2019) and *adaptive practices* (Hegnes, 2019) to explore how actors understand, practice, and adapt the nexus of qualities related to place-based specificity and sustainability in GIs. Schatzki more specifically describes GIs as "understandings or senses of general matters pertinent to goings-on in the practice" (2013:34). Hegnes indicate that translations of meaning, social reorganisations, and material transformations are of importance in the dynamics between general understandings of sustainability and sustainable food production and consumption practices.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

During the last decade, sustainability has arisen to be an explicit and important quality in analysis of GIs. Applying the conceptual framework of SPT and adaptive practices is here proposed as a constructive approach to understand how producers and consumers adapt to GIs as a tool to contribute to a sustainable development and the consequences of this adaptive dynamic between understandings and practices.

The forthcoming study is expected to bring concrete examples from adaptations, solutions, and pathways adopted by different Norwegian apple GIs to handle the tension of general understandings of place-based specificity and sustainability.

New potential questions following this approach may be: Will it be easier to combine GIs with sustainable measures in food cultures with a weaker conception of *terroir* than in countries with a strong conception? What kinds of adaptive practices are active in the nexus of general understandings of place specificity and sustainability? What is the consequence of these adaptations for GIs, sustainability, and food security?

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