

STUDIES REGARDING THE E.U. STRATEGY IN THE FIELD OF AGRO-FOOD PRODUCT' S QUALITY

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Abstract

Both basic agricultural products and those with an added value are confronted with an ever increasing competition on the E.U. market due to the pressure carried out by the products originated in non- E.U. countries, where production charges are lower. Therefore, this being the case, the main success recipe for farmers and processors remains the promotion of quality. The E.U.'s agricultural policy aims at bear up their efforts through community systems and regulations along two main guidelines: basic standards and measures for quality promotion. Over the last years the consumers' demand for ecological products has increased. To this effect since 1991 the E.U. has been applying a standard which provides laws regarding the ecological agriculture both for European producers and processors and for the exporters which come from non-E.U. countries and who want to commercialize ecological products on the E.U. market. The basic principles of the ecological agro-food production have to comply with the requirements of the 834/2007 E.U Regulation which also makes mention of the method of labeling and certifying used for ecological products. Obtaining qualitative products which also correspond to the requirements of the retail chains presupposes the conformation to a set of standards, known worldwide under the name of Global G.A.P. rules, according to which farmers and processors can become certified , thus obtaining the statute of the market's preferred provider.

Key words: certification, farmers, labelling, quality, requirements.

INTRODUCTION

Taking into consideration the fact that at the moment Earth's population consists of over 7 billion inhabitants and in the near future a more substantial increase is foreseen it can be inferred that the demand for agro-food products will raise rapidly. Vegetables, fruit, grapes, wine and all the other horticultural by-products have always been highly valued by consumers all over the globe, playing an important role in nutrition (Dejeu et al., 1997). The considerable increase of the horticultural production has to comply with the ever rising standards and demands imposed by the consumers.

The E.U.'s agricultural policy has to bear up the farmers' efforts in occupying the first positions in the quest for quality. The first steps for that purpose have already been taken through community systems and regulations along two main guidelines: basic standards and measures for quality promotion.

E.U's merchandising standards are regulations which imply definitions of products, basic/

minimal standards and labeling requirements for customers' information for a large number of agricultural products and for some finite food products. Their aim is that of helping farmers deliver qualitative products that meet the consumers' expectations, avoid disappointing the latter and facilitate the comparison of prices regarding different classes of product quality (Banu et al., 2007).

Merchandising standards have been adopted in order to replace the various national standards and to thus facilitate the commercial trades on the exclusive market.

Consumers' request for ecological food products has risen constantly over the last years, demand exceeding supply. The community market of agro-food ecological products continues to be fragmented at a national level.

Since 1991 the E.U. has been applying a standard that implies rules concerning ecological agriculture for European producers and processors and for the exporters from the

third party countries who wish to bring ecological products into the community market. The community standard strictly observes the rules regarding ecological agriculture which have been established within the international standard adopted through Codex Alimentarius, which facilitates the recognition of community ecological products that are exported to other countries.

The goals of strategy and policy for the branch of the ecological agriculture were established in 2004 and defined in "The European Action Plan for Food Products and Ecological Agriculture". The most important legislative process consisted of the framing of a new regulation regarding ecological agriculture, enacted in June 2007.

The certification systems can enable retailers to assure or to impose conformation to certain production and delivery constraints. The emergence of these systems along the years is the result of the assessments performed by the retailers which have highlighted the consumers' wish of knowing more details about the food products they are purchasing. The main aspects the consumers are concerned of are hygiene (sanitation), safety and the price.

Agricultural product qualities include both product characteristics (physical, chemical, microbiological and organoleptic features – size, appearance, taste, look, ingredients, etc.) and farming attributes (production method, type of animal husbandry, use of processing techniques, place of farming and of production, etc.).

The quest for quality is a vital part of the EU agro-food sector's strategy in the global marketplace. The EU remains an important producer of basic agricultural products.

Buying food and drink produced in the EU means buying quality, chosen from a rich diversity of products reflecting the different traditions and regions in the Community. Consumers around the world know this: the EU's agro-food sector has a reputation for high quality thanks to decades or even centuries of hard work, investment, innovation and attention to excellence.

This tradition of high quality operates in several ways. At a basic level, all farmers in the EU are legally bound to respect some of the most stringent farming requirements in the

world. Among other things, these relate to environmental protection, animal welfare and the use of pesticides and veterinary products. Beyond these basic requirements, farmers and food producers use their expertise and imagination to give their products other, individual qualities valued by consumers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to be able to perform this study concerning the E.U. strategy regarding the quality increase of the agri food products we have used a series of present-day standards, norms and legal requirements as our source of information, among which I mention:

- The E.U. Regulation 834/2007 regarding the obtainment, labeling and certification of ecologic products,
- The GlobalGAP Standard regarding the implementation of good agricultural practices for the obtainment of the farm certification according to the norms,
- The Green Paper on agricultural product quality.

As a result of these materials and of some research papers or specialized publications we have carried out a synthesis which shows the current situation and the E.U. tendencies regarding the production and commercialization of quality agri food products.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study which was carried out were structured in such a manner so as to enable the presentation of the aspects regarding the production, labeling and certification of the ecologic products, of the geographical indications products and of that of traditional products.

THE CURRENT STATE WITH REFERENCE TO THE LABELING AND THE CERTIFICATION OF AGRO-FOOD PRODUCTS

An essential goal of agricultural quality policy is to inform buyers and consumers about product characteristics and farming attributes. Unless buyers and consumers have accurate, useful and guaranteed information about these characteristics and attributes, they cannot be expected to pay a fair price.

Agricultural quality policy has evolved over time. However, this evolution has taken place on a piecemeal basis — instrument by instrument, sector by sector. Combining the various instruments into a more coherent whole and developing the overall policy would help it to deliver even stronger results. This further development must be sufficiently flexible, take account of the private and national schemes that dominate the market and ensure innovation. The full picture is shown in Figure 1.

Schemes can be either ‘certification-type’ or ‘labelling-type’. Certification is best when the undertakings made are complex; these are usually laid down in a detailed specification and checked periodically (e.g. annually), for example by a certifying body. Labelling measures are best for relatively straightforward claims that are normally self-declared by producers and subject to official controls. Both certification and labelling can show that a product meets baseline standards. They can also both be used to indicate value-adding qualities beyond baseline standards — either product characteristics or farming attributes.

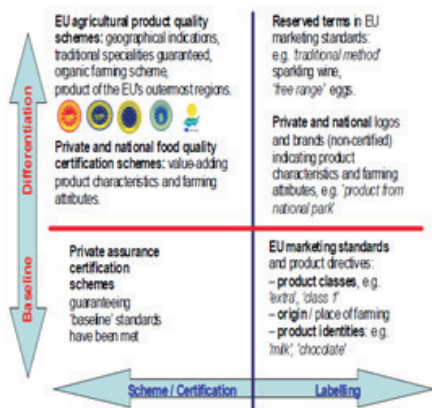


Figure 1. Quality and assurance certification schemes and marketing standards (<http://ec.eur-lex.europa.eu/>.)

Consultations on the development of agricultural product quality policy began in 2006 with a stakeholder hearing, followed by a conference in Brussels on 5-6 February 2007 (Codex Alimentarius Commission and the UN Economic Commission for Europe). The Commission also launched policy reviews of

the schemes for geographical indications for agricultural products and foodstuffs and for traditional specialties guaranteed. This work culminated in the Green Paper consultation and the High Level Conference on Agricultural Product Quality held in Prague on 12-13 March 2009 (Green Paper on agricultural product quality-COM 2008 641).

The main messages from stakeholders included strong support for the E.U's main quality schemes (geographical indications and organic farming) and marketing standards, but also called for simplification and streamlining. Farmers, producers and consumers urged greater use of place of farming labelling. On the other hand, processors and retailers warned that it can be difficult to track the farming origins of ingredients in processed foodstuffs. As a result of these consultations and examination of the current measures, the Commission has identified three main issues to be addressed in developing agricultural product quality policy, namely:

- **Information:** to improve communication between farmers, buyers and consumers about agricultural product qualities;
- **Coherence:** to increase the coherence of EU agricultural product quality policy instruments;
- **Complexity:** to make it easier for farmers, producers and consumers to use and understand the various schemes and labelling terms.

Agricultural product quality policy should contribute to achievement of the objectives of the CAP. In particular, sustainability of farming systems should be further enhanced through quality policy, and the farming attributes of products of such systems should be better known and communicated to citizens and consumers.

Against this background, it is proposed to develop agricultural product quality policy through a structured approach, comprising:

- For certification-type schemes, the development of guidelines for good functioning of certification schemes, and ensuring coherence of any new E.U. schemes.
- For labelling-type measures, development of E.U. marketing standards within the single Common Market Organisation.

In addition, existing EU schemes and marketing standards should be simplified and clarified wherever possible.

Stakeholder comments concerned notably the introduction of the *Ecolabel* and its potential overlap with the existing organic scheme.

AIMS REGARDING THE PROMOTION OF AGRO-FOOD PRODUCTS' QUALITY

E.U. farming requirements

The Green Paper asked how farmers can best show that they have complied with basic EU requirements, such as environmental rules, animal welfare standards, and strict controls on use of pesticides and animal health products. Two possibilities were raised: an 'EU requirements' label or logo, or obligatory place-of-farming labelling. An 'E.U. requirements' label would be shown on all products (EU or imported) that had been farmed in line with EU minimum requirements. In the Green Paper responses, the overwhelming view from consumers, farmers, processors and retailers and others, was opposed to such a label. On the other hand, many respondents supported greater use of place-of-farming labelling as giving useful basic information about agricultural products.

Marketing standards

Marketing standards and product directives contain technical descriptions of agricultural products, their composition, characteristics and the production methods used. Fisheries products are also covered by a specific marketing regime. They have been adopted not only by the EU, but also by multilateral bodies (Food Quality Schemes). There are four types of information contained in marketing standards (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of marketing standard (<http://ec.eu-lex.europa.eu/>).

RESERVED TERMS	Examples: „free range, eggs: „barn“ eggs, „first cold pressed“, extra virgin and virgin olive oil, „traditional method“, sparkling wine
PRODUCT CLASSIFICATION	Examples: fruit: extra, class 1, class 2 Eggs: large, medium, small
PRODUCT IDENTITY	Examples: definition of butter, fruit juice, chocolate, wine, extra virgin olive oil
ORIGIN OR PLACE OF FARMING LABELLING	Examples: fruit and vegetables: place of harvest Olive oil: place of harvest and of pressing

In their responses to the Green Paper, farmers and producers, processors, traders and retailers supported marketing standards, saying they are needed for sellers to demonstrate the quality of product they offer, and for purchasers to know what they are buying. However, there were also calls for simplification. EU marketing standards were criticised for being too detailed, too prescriptive — relying on compulsory rules when voluntary rules would suffice — and for being too cumbersome to adapt quickly to changing market circumstances.

Many respondents to the Green Paper also wanted „optional reserved terms“ to be developed, for example to define what can be called „mountain product“ and „low carbon“. „Optional“ reserved terms do not have to be used to describe product in commerce or on labels, but if they are used, the product must correspond to the definition laid down.

In addition, consumers and farmers called for greater use of „place of farming“ labelling (Table 2).

The Commission intends to address the following aspects of marketing standards:

– need for general basic standard:

Compulsory rules could be laid out in a general basic marketing standard. This would cover those matters where a voluntary approach might distort the single market or compulsory labelling is necessary to provide consumers with basic information about products.

– place-of-farming labelling:

To respond to many consumers' and farmers' preferences for labelling that identifies the place where agricultural product was farmed, the Commission will consider appropriate labelling within marketing standards for agricultural products, while taking into account the specificities of some sectors, in particular concerning processed agricultural products.

Table 2. Demand for place of farming labelling (<http://ec.eu-lex.europa.eu/>).

Place of farming labelling	Obligatory country of origin labelling and/or place of farming labelling has been introduced in Australia (all agricultural products and foodstuffs) and the US (selected agricultural product sectors), among other countries. In the EU, obligatory place of farming labelling applies to beef and veal, fruit and vegetables, eggs, poultry meat, wine,
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	honey, olive oil (from 2009) and EU organic products (from 2010). Origin labelling also applies to aquaculture products.
	„Place of farming“ in the context of marketing standards refers to the place of harvest of crop products, birth and raising of livestock, the place of milking for dairy cows, and so on.
	„Origin“ may refer, in the case of a processed product, to the place of last substantial transformation, and therefore not necessarily to the „place of farming“ of the agricultural product.

Optional reserved terms

Optional reserved terms should be used where it is necessary to define information about product qualities for consumers (e.g. „first cold pressed“ extra virgin and virgin olive oil). As a possible alternative to EU legislation, the Commission will investigate further the option of using CEN, the European Committee for Standardisation, for detailed rules of this type. In addition, the Commission will examine the feasibility of laying down specific optional reserved terms for „product of mountain farming“ and „traditional product“.

One way of setting more appropriate marketing standards could be to ask stakeholders to develop the rules themselves. This is already done for the development of industrial standards under CEN (Table 3).

Table 3. CEN (<http://ec.eur-lex.europa.eu/>).

The European Committee for Standardisation (CEN)	CEN is a private entity with 30 national members, from EU Member States, and EFTA countries. CEN activities are the result of collective activities of stakeholders, manufacturers, users, research organizations, government departments, and consumers.
	CEN develops voluntary European Standards (ENs). These become the single common standard in all 30 countries. ENs help build a European Internal Market for goods and services and assist international trade.

– international standards:

The Commission will continue to refer to and contribute actively to the development of international standards.

Geographical indications

Geographical indications are names that identify products as originating in a territory where a given quality, reputation or other characteristic of the product is essentially attributable to its geographical origin (ec.europa.eu). The geographical indications schemes provide protection of intellectual property rights for products described by registered geographical indications; and marketing assistance, primarily by conveying information as to compliance with the geographical indication system. The schemes enhance the credibility of products in the eyes of consumers and enable fair competition between producers.

Representatives of producers of geographical indication products have called for greater rights and control over their use — for example, to control production (using quotas), and to control the use of geographical indication names on the packaging of processed products.

In the international context, the geographical indications system is well established in the EU and in many non-EU countries. However, in some trading partners, specific legislation does not exist or EU names are not widely protected within the non-EU-country systems.

Organic farming

Since 1991, the E.U. organic farming regulation has protected the identity and the added value of the „*organic*“, „*biologica*“, „*ecologica*“, „*eco*“ and „*bio*“ labels. Organic farming is defined in EU legislation and at international level in a *Codex Alimentarius* guideline. This means consumers can be confident of the quality of organic products and it facilitates trade in the single market and with non-EU countries.

In order to foster trade in organic products, the Commission will seek mutual recognition of organic standards with non-EU countries and will contribute to the development of the *Codex Alimentarius* organic guideline.

Beginning with 2010, the label of the organic products obtained in E.U. feature the new eco-leaf logo, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. The „Eco-leaf” logo of E.U

Traditional specialities

The EU scheme for registration of „traditional specialities guaranteed” was intended to identify and protect the names of traditional products.

The Commission proposes to investigate the feasibility of introducing the term „traditional product” as a reserved term defined within marketing standards and abolishing the current scheme.

CONCLUSIONS

Practical steps should improve communication between farmers, buyers and consumers on the quality of agricultural products, unify rules on agricultural products quality, and simplify schemes and labels.

The main aims the E.U. farmers should be in route for in order to obtain higher-ranking product exploitation and a raise of the income are:

- obtaining ecological products;
- promoting products with geographical indications;
- certifying the production systems according to the ISO, quality and food product safety standards.

The certifying of producers and processors of agro-food products according to the standards (example Global G.A.P etc) determines their statute as the market’s preferred provider.

The raise of the level of the consumers’ education determines their purchasing of the agro-cultural products according to the relation between quality and price, which favors those producers and processors which have been certified according certain laws and standards (for example Codex Alimentarius, etc).

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