

## THE PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDE OF MOUNTAIN PRODUCERS TOWARDS THE OPTIONAL QUALITY LABEL "MONTAN PRODUCT"

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### Abstract

In the general acceptance of the mountain area, it is defined as an area with severe natural constraints, which includes over 30% of Romania's territory. Mountain agriculture is mainly carried out in small farms with low production, a fact due precisely to socio-economic conditions and geographical limitations. For this reason, the obtained products must value their sensory and nutritional particularities, simultaneously with gaining the consumer's trust regarding their quality and authenticity. The adoption of the optional "Mountain Product" quality designations is a starting point for relaunching and supporting the mountain economy. The aim of this paper is to understand the perception that mountain producers have on the products they obtain as well as an understanding if the mention of optional quality is a viable opportunity in the attempt to revitalize the mountain economy.

**Key words:** montan product, mountain farmers, mountain producers, sustainability, development

The environmental conditions specific to the mountain area have led over time to the definition of a local culture with a strong specificity. Over time, the mountainous area was considered a territory with natural and structural disadvantages. Currently we can discuss the advantages of mountain villages and the extremely important role played in our times when we are talking about food crisis, health crisis, economic crisis and of course security crisis on many levels.

The major advantage is represented by the territorial location of the mountain households, the accentuated spread significantly reducing the possibilities of infection and spread of diseases. Also, the unpolluted air from the mountains, the ozone layer and solar radiation, with static bacteria or virus effects, are factors of the greatest significance, for supporting the fight against and mitigating the effects of pandemic aggressions, current and for the future (Bratoveanu B. *et al*, 2021; Rey R., 2014).

However, despite these advantages that mountain agriculture has, it was noted that the number of peasant households is in a continuous decrease. According to the provisional data published in March 2022 by the National Institute of Statistics as a result of the 2020 General Agricultural Census, they are at least worrying. Thus, between 2010 and 2020, 488,000 agricultural holdings with an area of less than 1

hectare disappeared, representing a little over a quarter of their total number.

Each mountain household represents a family that works the land, taking care of their health, the animals and the nature they work with. In the mountain area, most households are interdependent. They represent the core of rural communities, being essential for keeping rural culture alive and offering quality products (Mazzocchi C., Sali, G., 2022).

To support these communities, we need a democratic process through which the government engages in serious dialogue with associations of small producers and farmers. A first step was taken by developing the optional quality mention "Mountain Product" which can represent the starting point for revitalizing and supporting the mountain economy. The purpose of this paper is to understand the perception that mountain producers have towards the optional quality mention "Mountain Product" (Bonadonna A. *et al*, 2002).

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

Considering the large number of studies regarding the benefits offered by the right to use the optional quality mention of the mountain product from the consumer's point of view, we considered it appropriate to highlight the perception of the use of the brand among producers as well. Also reviewing the specialized

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literature dedicated to this topic, it is easy to see that most of the articles and studies mainly contain qualitative data.

As for the stages of the scientific approach, they have as their starting point the analysis of the specialized literature, regarding the specifics of the mountain economy and the benefits of using the optional quality mention "mountain product".

Later, in order to obtain the data necessary for the quantitative analysis, I wrote a questionnaire that, through administration and processing, would provide the data necessary to understand the producers' perception of the "mountain product" optional quality scheme.

When creating the questionnaire, we took into account the following stages specific to the investigation:

- establishing and delimiting the topic: the perception and attitude of mountain producers towards the optional quality label "mountain product";
- formulation of objectives: identification of the general perception of producers regarding the use of the optional quality scheme and the attitude of producers following the use of the "mountain product" label;
- establishing the research tools: the research involved the use of sampling by the quota method, and the determination of the population model was carried out according to the characteristics resulting from the research objectives,
- determining the population: the population is represented by the producers of agri-food products from the mountainous area of Romania. The population includes both farmers who have legal status and those who are not registered with the Trade Office.;
- pre-investigation: the information obtained in this stage was also used to organize the theoretical and factual stage;
- theoretical and factual documentation: consisted in identifying relevant information regarding the researched population, the natural and social environment;
- building the sample: the characteristics, the economic size of the company, the way of marketing the production and their type (primary or processed production) were taken into account;
- pretesting and finalizing the questionnaire: it consisted in administering an intermediate form of the questionnaire to a number of five subjects to validate its content and form;
- on-site administration of the questionnaires: it was carried out during September 2022 at the headquarters of the units, in the time interval 10-18. During the completion of the questionnaires, explanations were provided which consisted in clarifying some questions and support in choosing the answers. The

average duration of administration of a questionnaire was 30 minutes;

- coding of the answers: it involved assigning codes to each question and each of their answer options. Later, the data analysis was carried out with the help of the computer, by using the spreadsheet and database management program Microsoft Excel 2016;
- drafting the investigation report: a number of 78 interviews were conducted based on the elaborated questionnaire, the data processing being carried out using: "Special Program for Social Statistics" - SPSS 19, a program dedicated to the realization of social statistics.

The qualitative evaluation was made taking into account the frequency of the answers, this offering the possibility of making some comparisons, revealing the differences as well as issuing hypotheses regarding the causes and factors that influence the perception and attitude of mountain producers towards the optional quality label "mountain product".

In order to detect the attitude of the interviewees towards the voluntary quality scheme "mountain product" the necessary information was detected by scaling techniques.

The method used is the Likert scale, an easy construction method consisting of a series of statements semantically related to the attitudes to be investigated. The items used must be proposed to the respondents through statements that express the degree of agreement/disagreement. Each answer is assigned a score with positive values from 1 to 5 where: 1 is not important at all, 3 is indifferent and 5 is very important. The final score will be obtained by averaging the scores of each individual's answers on the entire block and as a result we will obtain the individual's position on the investigated concept.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Mountain areas occupy about 19 million hectares and represent 40% of the surface of the European continent, hosting 20% of the population. According to the data provided by INSSE, mountain areas occupy approximately 30% of the country's surface, the mountain population representing almost 15% of Romania's population.

The mountain is not just an orographic relief, which is why it is reductive to define it as such, because it would lead to an underestimation of the deep relationships that the mountain entertains with everything that surrounds it. In these areas, agricultural and forestry activities have a relevant importance and very often they are the only ones that guarantee the perpetuation of the populations (European Commission, 2017).

As far as the European Union is concerned, the mountains have never been the object of a specific community policy, however, the interest in

mountain areas has strengthened over time, both in the sphere of common agricultural policies and that of regional development. The countries of the European Union have autonomously identified the limits of the mountain territory taking into account factors such as altimetry, average slope and height differences. It should be mentioned that the same climatic, morphological and socio-economic differences are still not perceived uniformly in the countries of the European Union which, in the absence of an univocal criterion, have identified the limits of the mountain territory by order at national level and independently of one the other one.

In the case of Romania, the delimitation of mountain areas is carried out based on art. 18 of Regulation (EC) no. 1257/1999 regarding the aid granted from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) for rural development. This includes:

- administrative-territorial units located at average altitudes greater than or equal to 600 m, their limits being those of the isic blocks that belong to these UATs;
- administrative-territorial units located at medium altitudes between 400 - 600 m and having an average slope equal to or greater than 15%, their limits being those of the physical blocks that belong to these UATs.

According to this delimitation, the mountain area of Romania includes 658 UATs (NUTS 5) representing 20% of the number of UATs existing in Romania and a total area of 71,340 km<sup>2</sup>, respectively 30% of the territory (238,391 km<sup>2</sup>).

Agriculture has always played a fundamental role in the economy of the mountainous area of Romania. Mountainous areas have a fragility in terms of agri-food production, on the one hand, due to permanent natural disadvantages, as well as due to the fragile demographic balance. The key factor for solving these problems could be a correct management of economic and environmental policies, by making investments to improve farmers' access to resources. In this way, the ability of mountain farmers to generate income can be enhanced and the attractiveness of the area among young people will increase. In the medium and long term, relaunching agriculture and developing the agro-food processing sector could stop the inexorable social phenomenon of depopulation by stimulating entrepreneurial activities. (Brumă I.S., 2021)

The weak point of mountain agriculture is that of not always being able to face the competitive conditions, for the so-called marginality or much higher production costs than in plain areas, the natural climatic limitations that

make the spring-summer seasons very short compared with other areas and consequently product prices that are difficult to compete in a market where the emphasis is on price.

In this context, the market for mountain products must be built, and the use of an optional "Mountain Product" quality mention that certifies the fact that food production and processing was carried out in mountain areas can be a way to preserve the sustainability of these areas. That is, by using appropriate certifications, the competitiveness of the traditional mountain agricultural system could be increased.

The "mountain product" European quality scheme was established under the auspices of Romanian mountain producers (*figure 1*) The National Agency of the Mountain Zone is the designated authority to verify the compliance of applications in order to grant the right to use the logo of the mountain product, as well as to ensure compliance with the conditions assumed by the producers who have joined the optional quality scheme.



Figure 1 The logo of the mountain product of Romania

Source: romontana.org

By using this quality scheme, the aim is not only to increase the economic value of primary production, but also to guarantee the authenticity of derived food products obtained in the mountain area. For this, manufacturers need a way to communicate to consumers the characteristics of their products and guarantee them that they can be correctly identified on store shelves.

### Research on the producers' perception of the voluntary quality scheme "mountain product"

The mountain area has always offered the opportunity to obtain quality products. However, mountain agriculture is currently in progressive

decline, both in terms of the number of people involved in the sector, as well as in terms of land surfaces and registered animal herds. This state of affairs is directly due to the more difficult environmental and socio-economic conditions specific to the mountain area.

This case study arose from the desire to evaluate the perception and interest of mountain producers in using the label "mountain product" on their product labels. At the same time, through the case study, I want to know the impact that the brand has on the economic results of the companies that have joined this quality scheme.

In other words, I have the right to assess whether the optional indication constitutes a viable opportunity for companies in less favored areas and to stimulate revitalization by valuing local productions on the part of the consumer.

Data collection began in September 2022 and ended in the same month. In this case, the administrators of some companies that have already joined the optional "mountain product" quality indication were interviewed, as well as those that have not yet done so for various reasons.

In this survey, the administrators of several representative companies in the sector were interviewed, the products offered on the market by them being: fruits and vegetables, milk and dairy products, meat and meat preparations, honey and bee products. 70% of the respondents are both producers and processors, while the remaining 30% are only in the producer category.

Describing the socio-demographic characteristics of the entrepreneurs, it appears that 55% of the respondents are women between 30 and 50 years old, while the remaining 45% are men but their age group tends to increase and is between 40 and 60 years old (*figure 2*).

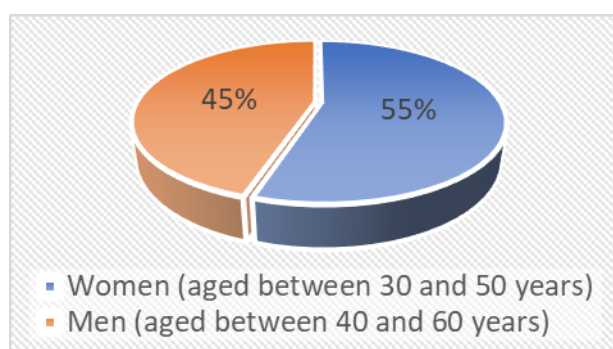


Figure 2 The age of company administrators

Regarding the qualification, all respondents have at least a baccalaureate diploma, about 30% are graduates of a higher education institution (*figure 3*).

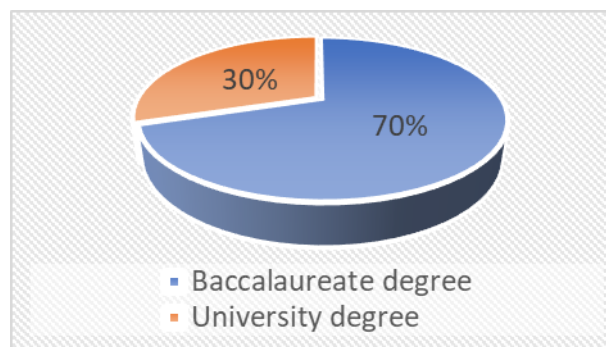


Figure 3 The level of education held by company administrators

20% of the interviewed companies adhered to the "mountain product" optional quality system, while 15% of those interviewed rely on organic farming (*figure 4*). The types of ecologically certified products are honey, milk and dairy products.

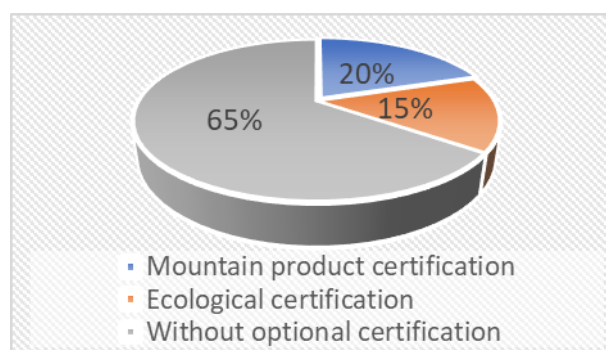


Figure 4 Optional production certifications

The interviewed companies have relatively small sizes, all of them being small and medium-sized companies.

Regarding the way of marketing the production, the producers mainly prefer direct sales, which represent the maximum expression of the short food chain. Thus, all aspects of marketing fall under the responsibility of the farmer. This approach comes with both advantages and disadvantages: partly the costs associated with product distribution are eliminated, but at the same time the time and resources allocated to the marketing activity are high compared to the level of production obtained. 40% of the interviewees rely exclusively on intermediaries and do not allocate any resources for segmental marketing (*figure 5*) (Leonte E. *et al*, 2002).

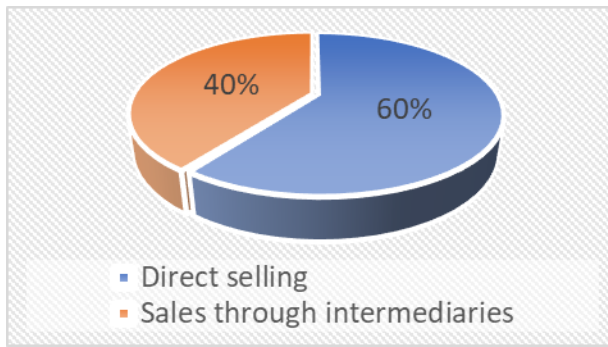


Figure 5 Ways of marketing the production

Respondents were asked if they were aware of the existence of the "mountain product" voluntary quality scheme and the benefits of using this logo on their product labels. To this question, the majority of the answers identified the fact that this quality scheme was promoted among the producers in the mountain area, but without really capturing their interest (Rey R., 2015; Pipirigeanu I., Popa M., 2019; Pagliacci F. *et al*, 2022).

For those respondents who have already joined this optional quality scheme, we were asked for information regarding the reasons why they decided to join the "mountain product" brand. Following the analysis of the answers to this question, it emerged that the main stimulating factor was that of social ethical engagement for products that respect tradition, local culture and the environment, and only then the image benefits and highlighting the product on the market. This also shows the fact that they have joined the optional quality scheme, especially those farmers who fully understand the value of social ethical engagement in order to offer for sale products of a superior quality concomitant with offering a high importance to environmental protection activities.

Regarding the identification of possible problems in the process of joining the brand, there were no problems of any kind in accordance with the specifications, nor were there any additional costs that the procurators were not aware of from the beginning.

By using a Likert-type scale, the importance attributed to the application of the brand was evaluated, the result indicating that the representatives of the sector assigned a maximum value, corresponding to the wording "very important", despite the fact that some of them do not consider starting the accession procedures to brand.

With regard to the price policy, joining the optional quality scheme did not bring benefits to the companies, as an increase in the selling price was not possible. On the other hand, 90% of the producers who obtained the right to use the brand showed themselves fully.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the results obtained in this research, we can affirm that the optional quality scheme "mountain product" represents a viable solution for the valorization of typical mountain products (Council of the European Union, 2021).

Applying the label makes it easier to identify the products on the store shelves, giving these products a direct connection with the following attributes: quality, healthy, evoking a return to nature (Darnhofer I. *et al*, 2015).

In the mountainous areas, agricultural management is very difficult and consequently obtaining adequate income is only possible to a limited extent. Consequently, mountain agriculture is not competitive on the market due to costs (Brezuleanu S., 2009; Joshi S. *et al*, 2021).

On the other hand, the advantages of production in mountain areas relate to obtaining high-quality food, which are distinguished by the efficient use of resources, protection against pandemic or other crises, the preservation and development of cultural landscapes as well as the preservation of biodiversity.

According to the producers' perception, the most important characteristics that could push consumers to choose a product with the "mountain product" brand. they are: authenticity, quality, as well as the origin of the raw materials. Thus, despite the contradiction recorded between the answers of the interviewees and the concrete actions carried out by most of them, the general perception is that the mountain product can represent an opportunity to relaunch the economy of the mountain area and would suggest an increase in the number of producers who will obtain the right to use the brand on their products.

The promotion of mountain products through a specific quality label could contribute to the creation of added value for production and sustainable local development. Today agriculture in mountain areas is an integral part of sustaining mountain communities, but this is not sufficiently competitive in the current socioeconomic context.

In conclusion, in the last question of the questionnaire, where it was asked to provide some suggestions for improving the promoted strategies, the following ideas emerged: "production in mountain areas is already a limit of climate, accessibility, protection policies of wild animals that destroy the crops as well as the quality and inclination of the agricultural lands. Due to these obvious reasons, generally the processing of the products does not take place in the same location as the production one. These aspects offer advantages regarding the quality of the final



product, but are also disadvantages represented by the difficulties recorded at all levels of the activity. These factors, combined with the fact that the institutions have not implemented dedicated policies depending on the specifics of the areas and the introduction of all producers in a single category, has the effect of closing small businesses.

Following the coronavirus pandemic, a constant concern was identified on the part of consumers regarding the quality of the purchased products as well as the way of procuring the products, wanting to establish a relationship of trust with the supplier of the purchased products. In this context, the current food security crisis we are facing was aggravated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the latter being forced to fight a battle on the agricultural front as well (Stancu M., 2020).

In order to ensure long-term food security, it is urgently necessary to identify coherent solutions to stop the disappearance of local producers, especially those in the mountainous area. Only in this way can we avoid deepening the problem of rural poverty, the provision of agricultural products to the human population and the continuity of local traditions (Darnhofer I. *et al*, 2010).

Although the optional indication of quality does not benefit from a consolidated image on the market, we can say with certainty that it can represent a promoter of sustainable economic development. However, it should be mentioned that this hypothesis can become a reality only if the optional "mountain product" quality indication will be adequately supported by targeted rural development policies and effective communication at the level of the competent public institutions.

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