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Mountain pastures and local products in Southern Albania. Between production and resource management issues

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Abstract. The paper aims to present changes and current dynamics of mountainous pastoral systems in Southern Albania (Korca region) and to identify origin-based quality products as a strategy for sustainable rural development. According to the historical data (available or reconstructed through interviews), rapid and unregulated changes in mountainous productive systems within the post-communism transition threaten local natural resources and cultural landscapes. Changes are primarily due to massive out-migration of population and the consequent brutal disruption of social and productive fabric as also to the collapse of the ancient value chains without establishing a proper institutional context for the empowerment of livestock sector and a balanced management of mountain pastures. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of urban markets and the increase in sales of milk and meat coming from mountainous territories –perceived by consumers as of distinct quality– create new perspectives for the studied region.

Keywords. Mountain pastures – Local products – Pastoral systems – Albania.

Alpes et produits locaux au sud de l'Albanie. Les problèmes de production et les perspectives de commercialisation

Résumé. Le papier vise à présenter les changements et les dynamiques actuelles des systèmes pastoraux de montagne en Albanie du Sud (région de Korça) et d'identifier les produits de qualités liées à l'origine comme une stratégie de développement rural durable. Selon les données historiques disponibles (ou reconstituées à travers des entretiens), des changements rapides et non réglementés dans les systèmes de production de montagne durant la transition postcommuniste menacent les ressources naturelles locales et les paysages culturels. Les changements sont principalement dus à une émigration massive de la population et l'interruption brutale consécutive du tissu social et productif mais aussi à l'effondrement des anciennes chaînes de valeur sans l'établissement d'un cadre institutionnel approprié pour l'autonomisation du secteur de l'élevage et une gestion équilibrée des alpages. Néanmoins, la croissance rapide des marchés urbains et l'augmentation des ventes de lait et de viande provenant de territoires montagneux, perçus par les consommateurs comme de qualité distincte, crée de nouvelles perspectives pour la région étudiée.

Mots-clés. Alpes – Produits locaux – Systèmes pastoraux – Albanie.

I – Introduction

The Albanian mountainous areas have territorial specificities and face particular economic and human context. At the same time, local products have strong link to their specific origin, especially those being processed like cheese. In fact, little technical change can be seen as a chance, as they still have a very rustic and authentic character that is appreciated by some consumers. The communist collectivization period during 1944-1991 followed by a long economic transition for these

areas creates nowadays a binding context of the local economic development. In these areas the livestock farming system is dominant and is considered by researchers as a key resource for an endogenous local development (Bernard *et al.*, 2014; Garnier, 2013). This new Albanian specific context has rarely been studied in depth and this paper tends to respond with a descriptive approach to the question of how the management of the mountain pastures and the resource use access affects the farming systems of the local breeders. We try to identify pressures and incentives that affect the local farming system both from the production and commercialization factors, and how the local actors react.

For this purpose, we have chosen to study a mountainous territory in the Korça region, which is one of the most developed centers in southeastern Albania. Vithkuq is a mountainous territory, with a specific knowledge and know-how in livestock farming systems. The recent data shows that the market demand for pastoral products, especially from small ruminants, has increased in recent years in the region of Korça (Bombaj *et al.*, 2015). Despite the desertification after the fall of communism (Lerin and Marku., 2010) data shows a sharp increase in the herd size but also new dynamics in the local production systems (Çili *et al.*, 2013) and issues on natural resources use. The demand for these local products partly explains the expansion of herds in the area and many farmers see the need to produce in large quantities to thrive economically. This situation has created an increasing demand for pastures that are managed in an unclear way, generating competition and conflicts among the farmers, including seasonal moving breeders from West Albania, for the best pastures during summer.

II– Materials and methods

1. Materials

The study area comprises a total of 13 villages with a surface of 243.6 km². Combining statistics and preparatory discussions, the selection of villages was done according to the number of families in each village, herd size, proximity and ties with the three dairies in the territory. In order to gather data that can inform the diverse farming systems, we have made interviews with respect to a balance between specialized farmers, intermediate farmers and subsistence farmers

2. Methods

Stage 1 – Quick characterization of the territory.

Stage 2 – In-depth interviews in the municipality. It was done with semi-structured interviews (formal and informal) and observations collected directly from actors/landscape and farms.

Stage 3 – Interviews outside the study area on the wholesale market and the retail market in Korça and stores details in Tirana.

Stage 4 – Analysis of the field results and discussion.

III – Results and discussion

1. The local farming system and pressures affecting it

In Albania according to (MAFCP, 2014) around 352,315 farm households still have a high level of land fragmentation (1.16 ha/farm with an average of 4.8 parcels). The agrarian reforms towards the market economy have pushed farmers to adapt their local farming systems. In the considered territory the average size of the farm is 1.22 ha. As the farm size is very small and the summer pas-

tures very rich, the family livestock farming is one of the main sources of family income for the local farmers. The dominant farming system is based on sheep farming. The pastoral dynamics of the municipality of Vithkuq in the recent years is as follows in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Pastoral dynamics of the municipality of Vithkuq

Years	Total population	Herd size	Total milk production (tonnes)	Total meat production (tonnes)
2005	2,939	17,920	2,750	160,5
2014	1,660	18,549	2,520	249,7
Difference in %	-56%	+4%	-9%	+55

Source: Çili *et al.*, 2013; Matka, 2015; and author's calculation.

According to our surveys we can state that the local farming system is constituted by three different types of farms: (a) small subsistence farms; (b) intermediate farms producing market's surpluses; (c) specialized farms, whose production is mainly marketed. The local farming systems co-exist on the municipality's territory with farmers from other regions (transhumant).

The recent evolution of each type of farm in the territory can be summarized as follow:

- The small subsistence farms: 131 farms were identified, characterized by the self-consumption and with very occasional or no sale. This type of farm has 1-10 sheep/goats and / or 1-4 bovine animals. They don't have young labor force and don't do transhumance.
- The intermediate farms: 142 farms, characterized by a start of breeding specialization with fairly consistent sales. This type of farm has 11-99 sheep / goats and / or 5-9 bovine animals. They don't do transhumance but they tend to expand their activity if they have a young labor force.
- The specialized farms: 53 farms, they sale the majority of production. This type of farm has more than 100 sheep / goats or more than 10 bovine animals. They do transhumance and tend to expand their activity. The specialized farms tend to increase every year in the territory.

Some key elements have been identified as pressures on these farms. They can be grouped in 4 dimensions, and interact between each other and make the local farming system develop.

- First, the main technical changes at the farm level were the improvement of the breeds and the increased mechanization. The introduction of new breeds has led to controversial changes. Some "specialized" breeders are not able to manage their manure and throw it often in the rivers. Furthermore, as the arable land is very limited, some farmers lack fertilizing material for their crops and use large doses of chemical fertilizers to increase their crop production.
- Second, the policy changes since 1991 have led to a new context of property rights creating new possibilities for farmers to invest in their activities.
- Third, the local initiatives during the last fifteen years have given some new dynamics aiming for better production conditions for the local breeders.
- Fourth, market pressure: Although farmers have increased their milk and meat production, they do not really have a favorable bargaining power with the dairies where they sell their milk. The value chain of the dairy products is mostly informal and the transactions cannot be legally traced. The current dynamics of the value chain does not position the products in a niche market capable of engaging a virtuous circle for a good remuneration of the producers and for the reproduction of the natural resources.

2. The summer pastures: a crucial resource for the local farming system

After the collectivization period the local agro pastoral production systems have gradually evolved by adapting to the new economic context but the lack of a strategic public support has led to harm natural resource management. Recently the increased demand for the summer pastures by the dynamics of expansion of the local farmers and by farmers coming from other regions of Albania give new dynamics in terms of natural resource management issues. The herds of the transhumant breeders coming from the other regions are larger and more numerous to come in the recent years. Different types of mountain pastures properties were identified and the attribution of the summer pastures use rights causes some tensions with the local breeders because the pastures boundaries are not always clear. The access to summer pastures is one major factor that influences the farming systems of the local breeders. Their use is a major challenge for the management of both farming systems and the landscape.

This reorganization alters the operation of pastoral systems, with threats on local natural resources (concentrate overgrazing in some areas, abandonment of marginal areas and / or under-utilization of pastures in these areas, poor management of fertilizer and thus pollution of rivers around villages). The main issue is to identify the right levels and coordination mechanisms that can help local breeders to better organize to sell their milk and meat at a fair and reasonable price for their activity, while valorizing and respecting the proper use of the pastoral resource.

IV – Conclusions

Albanian context is changing, making the farms adapting fast. This induces recently big changes and challenges for the sustainable use of the natural resources. The local farming system in the considered study area is adapted to the new economic context. The specialization of the local breeders, especially for the meat production, is accompanied by an increased demand for the summer pastures. This resource is crucial both for the farming system, and the transhumant breeders coming from other regions of Albania. The management of this resource affects the local farming system and some conflicts generated by the summer pastures use rights are observed. Further research is needed to determine in what level the use rights decisions are taken and the role of the local breeders in the local management of use rights.

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