



REPORT ON THE FIRST MEETING OF AREPO COLLEGE OF PRODUCERS

September 4th, 2018 - Reggio Emilia (Italy)

On September 4th, 2018, AREPO held the first working meeting of the College of Producers, hosted by the Parmigiano-Reggiano Cheese Consortium in Reggio Emilia. With 25 participants from 5 different Member States, the meeting has been a success for the diversity of sectors and Regions represented. This variety of perspectives has enriched the discussion and facilitated the identification of several working priorities.

INTRODUCTION

Since March 2018, the College of Producers is chaired by the President of Parmigiano-Reggiano Cheese Consortium, Mr. Nicola Bertinelli. In his quality as Vice-president of AREPO, he launched this initiative to strengthen producers participation and define the working priorities for the next year.

The **President of AREPO, Mrs. Theano Vrentzou-Skordalaki**, introduced the meeting by thanking the Parmigiano-Reggiano Cheese Consortium that hosted the meeting. Furthermore, she laid down the guidelines for the discussion and encouraged the participants to engage in a constructive cooperation between producers and Regions, in order to contribute to the common goal of promoting and more effectively supporting Geographical Indications.

The **Vice-president of AREPO, Mr. Nicola Bertinelli**, welcomed the participants in Parmigiano-Reggiano headquarters and referred to the challenges that GI producers face in the coming period, among other, the new CAP post 2020, the revision of GI regulation, the EU bilateral agreements with third countries, and the crucial issues arising from consumer request for more sustainability.

Finally, the Secretary General, Mr Laurent Gomez, highlighted the success of this first initiative thanks to the high participation of producers and diversity of sectors and Regions represented. He concluded the introduction reminding that the College of Producers is one of the two pillars of AREPO network, which represents both Regions and Producers Associations. This mixed structure is one of the major strengths of the Association since, in a uniquely wide approach on GIs, it joins the production perspective and the needs and potentials in terms of rural development and territorial planning.

DISCUSSION

AREPO policy officer, Giulia Scaglioni presented AREPO activities and main working themes, i.e. CAP, promotion, international trade agreements ([you can consult the presentation here for more details](#)) in order to share and discuss it with the participants, as well as to introduce some working proposals/themes of interest for the College of Producers.

In line with the objective of the meeting, the discussion has been focused on 1) **how to strengthen the participation of producer representatives** in AREPO and 2) on **identifying other themes to be addressed to reply to the interest of producers**.

The presentation has been followed by a fruitful discussion with the producer representatives that has highlighted the following key points:

- It is important to achieve a better **recognition of the role of producer organisations** in the management of GIs. Producer consortia are very important for the protection of rural territories, thus we should have a specific regulation defining duties/responsibilities, as well as recognising the rights of producer organisations to receive support and funding from rural development. For this reason CAP support should be directed to producer organisations. Moreover, support policies should not only facilitate the creation of new GIs, but also support historical GI producers that need to adapt and modify their specifications to follow developments in technology and consumer needs.

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- **Bilateral trade agreements:** lack of transparency from EC in this area. At least in theory all GIs should be represented and protected in trade agreements. As far as intellectual property rights are concerned, it is not acceptable for a product to be protected in one country and not in another, just as it is not acceptable for only bigger GIs to be protected. We can imagine that it is not possible for all GIs to be protected as a result of the negotiations. Nevertheless, we must remind the Commission that all stakeholders must be listened to at the beginning of the negotiations, given the economic and socio-cultural importance of the GIs.
- **Multilateral Agreements - Lisbon Agreement:** The EC has decided to join the Geneva Act of Lisbon Agreement to better protect GIs. Nevertheless, it is not certain that all GIs will be protected as the EC proposes protection for a limited list. This would be a significant step backwards as the Lisbon Agreement is in fact the only multilateral agreement that protects GIs in 28 countries. As the EC simply has to join an existing agreement, there is no need to use a list: by joining the agreement, all European GIs will be protected, without having to resort to negotiations. Accession is a unilateral process, there is no third party.
- **Information and training on GIs:** the majority of **consumers** do not know what GIs are. It is therefore necessary to invest in correct information to explain what GIs represent for their territories (environmental protection, sustainability), as well as in terms of quality and food safety, thanks to the compliance with their product specifications. In this sense, work should also be done to inform and train **producers** on GIs. In fact, in many cases, producers who are not part of a quality system do not understand its value and importance in terms of protection and added value. This should be combined with and reinforced by economic support for EU product certification, to help producers understand the importance and legitimacy of GIs. Finally, it is very important to promote GIs through education and training programmes in schools, universities and research centres.
- **Working methodology:** How to share/disseminate AREPO's work to involve more producers and try to include producers from Northern Europe?
 - **Collaboration between OriGIn and AREPO:** it is important to find complementarity in our activities and identify possibilities for collaboration, in particular on free trade agreements.
 - **Organise meetings regularly with producers** to structure the work, exchange good practices/information, get to know each other and create a common platform to encourage other producers to participate. It is necessary to identify a common project to be implemented.
 - **Taking an active and proactive role, not just acting in defence:** credibility comes from the ability to propose solutions to the European Institutions, anticipating the needs of the sector.
 - **It is important to have a precise idea of what the GI sector represents in economic terms and in terms of turnover, in order to have more influence on the Institutions.** To make an initial estimate, we could use existing databases such as Qualigeo (Qualivita), OriGIn internal database and data from the SYAL research group.

CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion, the Secretary General, Laurent Gomez, presented a sum up of the discussion highlighting some key points for the future activities of AREPO.

- In particular, AREPO committed to **organise regular meetings** of the College of Producers as well as to strengthen the **collaboration with OriGIn EU**, in order to create a strong platform for producers participation. Inviting OriGIn to organise joint producers meetings could enrich both Associations by including a greater variety of representatives from different sectors and sizes. OriGIn represents the biggest GIs with international interests, while AREPO represents all the GIs from the territories of its member Regions. A common organisation would also overcome common problems concerning

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organisational costs (for ex. interpretation costs) and it would as well facilitate producer participation, reducing the number of meetings. In addition, it would be appropriate for AREPO and OriGIn to invite each other to participate in the events they organise in connection with the purpose of their collaboration. This is already the case as the Secretary General has already had two meetings in 2018 with President Claude Vermot-Desroches.

- The first priority will be monitoring **EU bilateral and multilateral trade agreements** in order to actively defend GIs and support their recognition and protection in third countries. On this particular issue, it is necessary to strengthen cooperation with OriGIn, without forgetting that AREPO's mission focuses on international agreements directly involving the EU, while competence for international agreements not involving Europe directly remains with OriGIn.
- Finally, **GIs sustainability** will be addressed as a special issue in occasion of the next General Assembly.

The Regional Minister of Agriculture of Emilia-Romagna Region, **Ms. Simona Caselli**, the Vice-President of Parmigiano-Reggiano Cheese Consortium, **Mr. Guglielmo Garagnani**, and the President of AREPO, **Ms. Theano Vrentzou-Skordalaki**, intervened at the end of the meeting with their conclusive speeches.

Ms. Caselli highlighted how the experience of GIs valorisation of Emilia-Romagna Region has underlined various strengths of these products which represent a strong element of contrast to the crisis and should therefore have an important role in the proposal for the next CAP.

The actions of the European networks of Regions and Producers, like AREPO, are very effective in achieving the objectives of negotiations with the European institutions. As transnational networks, they are able to propose to the Commission positions of compromise and synthesis between various actors. These proposals result much more proactive than the positions of individual Member States. It is therefore essential that AREPO take part in the debate on the future CAP, proposing proper recognition for GIs and defending the role of the Regions in the management of rural development plans.

Attention must be paid to the focus of the next CAP on sustainability, in particular to avoid the proliferation of environmental sustainability certifications at national level, which are difficult for consumers to recognise.

She concluded by welcoming the importance of the role of the College of Producers in completing the actions of the Regions and hoping that this initiative will lead to a series of activities for the promotion and protection of GIs.

Mr. Garagnani greeted and thanked the participants for their presence and active participation in the meeting, assuring that AREPO intend to capitalise on the conclusions producing a common position of the producers, to be shared in the next GA.

He also underlined an important common line in the interventions: the interest in knowledge and information at all levels. This means sharing good practices between AREPO producers, but also spreading knowledge and information to producers in Regions where AREPO is not yet present. It would be important to exploit the potential for "contagion" toward these Regions of Northern Europe, involving GI producers from these countries, to generate a positive debate on GIs in order to weaken anti-GI positions within the EU.

Finally, **AREPO President** concluded that the meeting marked our common interest in Geographical Indications as well as the great importance we give to our producers. It is a fact that without a high quality production no product can have a commercial interest. Therefore, it would be important to orient AREPO work on the topic of **a better market recognition for GIs, with a special attention for retailers.**

In addition, she advocated the need to invest in **consumer information and education**, asking for an adequate funding at EU level.

In conclusion, she reminded the importance of collaboration between Regions and Producers to implement our joint actions, as well as to improve our recognition and legitimacy as stakeholders toward the European Institutions, for the benefit of the whole GI supply chain.