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LOCALIZED AGRO-ALIMENTARY SYSTEMS IN THE PAMPAS
REGION, ARGENTINA.
THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR THE IDENTIFICATION,
CHARACTERIZATION AND VALUATION OF PAMPAS RURAL TERRITORIES

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Abstract: This paper examines the Localized Agro-alimentary Systems approach as an alternative for the study and development of rural territories, where it is recognized as a resource in this sense, culture and local economy associated with a typical agri-food product. This proposal is presented in a context where intensifies delocalization of production activities.

Keywords: rural territories, development, typical agri-food products

Resumen: En este trabajo se plantea al enfoque de Sistemas Agroalimentarios Localizados como una alternativa para el estudio y valorización de territorios rurales, donde se reconoce como recurso en ese sentido, a la cultura y economía local asociada a un producto agroalimentario típico. Esta propuesta se presenta en un contexto pampeano donde se intensifica la deslocalización de las actividades productivas.

Palabras clave: territorios rurales, desarrollo, productos agroalimentarios típicos

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LOCALIZED AGRO-ALIMENTARY SYSTEMS IN THE PAMPAS REGION, ARGENTINA

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR THE IDENTIFICATION, CHARACTERIZATION AND VALUATION OF PAMPAS RURAL TERRITORIES

1. Introduction

For the last five decades, in Latin America and generally in the world, has occurred a series of profound economic, technological and production transformation that have altered the rural areas (Barsky et al. 1988). These changes were closely linked to a model of globalization, the expansion of science and technology, and communication systems. In Argentina, specifically in the rural sector, this process has impacted significantly, changing its shape and function and thus, the territorial organization model. These change highlighted the consolidation of capitalism and with it, the creation of global systems of economic action (Sili, 2005).

Agriculturization process, deepened in Argentina in the 90s, has positioned agribusiness as the activity with greatest volume, expressed through increased yields in the major commodities, incorporating a technology package linked to direct sowing, transgenic seeds, and intensive use of agrochemicals, among others, accompanied by the insertion of foreign capital to the agricultural sector (Barsky and Gelman, 2009).

This restructuration of rural areas and agricultural production led to the need to re-discuss the theoretical approaches, with the central issue of new territorial reconfigurations, inter-scalar relations and strategies of the actors.

In this regard, in 1996, appeared in Europe the notion of Localized Agro-alimentary System (SIAL) in a context of exacerbation of the crisis of rural societies and worsening of environmental and food products problems. Changes in the rural, agriculture, food production and food consumption induced the need to develop new concepts to study these phenomena.

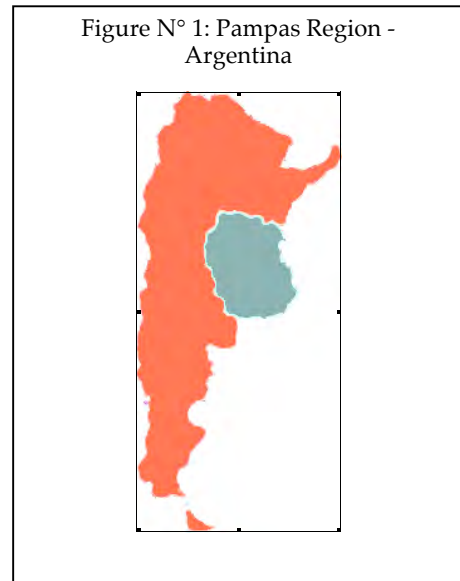
In this context, the SIAL were defined as...

systems made up of production and service units (agricultural, food companies, restaurants, etc..) associates, through its characteristics and its operation, to a specific territory. The media, products, people, their institutions, their know-how, their food habits and their networks of relations, are combined into a territory, to produce a form of food organization in a given area (Muchnik and Sautier, 1998).

More than ten years after its inception, this concept has been widely circulated. It has been constituted the SIAL International Network, which has made four congresses on the subject, contributing to the discussion and consolidation of this notion (Muchnik, 2006).

SIAL's approach involved the ambitious goal of changing the way we think production and food consumption, taking as a starting point for valuation of territorial resources, environmental issues and food cultures of different societies. In that sense, it proposes a comprehensive analysis of these rural territories, from which recognizes dimensions such as: food culture and specificity of the products; knowledge, skills and learning; territorial identities, actor's organization and networks. The territory is understood as a strategic actor, and as an assembly and competitiveness of local productive activities factor.

As mentioned earlier, the Pampas region has been characterized by an organization model based on the production of primary goods destined for exportation, with low diversification, high ecological fragility and high levels of exclusion and marginality (Sili, 2008). However, the presence/survival of other *real* and *lived* territories (Bozzano, 2009), where productive activities with significant territorial anchorage, is observed (Garat et al., 2008; Velarde et al., 2008; Pérez Centeno, 2008). In this regard, we find proposals



that posed to recognize the culture and identity as a structural framework in terms of territorial valuation, allowing pose new interpretation ways to rurality (Benedetto, 2006).

The attempt of a spatial configuration capable of generating a local accumulation in a globalizing scenario, presented its conceptual support from the endogenous capability of a local territory to generate wealth on the basis of their specific resources (Arocena, 1999; Albuquerque, 2001).

The *boom* of soybean and technological model imposed by the *pools of seed* accentuate this question, particularly for producers who must make strategic decisions regarding the use of their lands. The economic criteria play a central role in the decisions taken, but not exclusively. The history of each person, their identity, vision of the evolution of the countryside and the development of its own existence in this world, are also factors that influence decisions (Muchnik *et al*, 2006).

The revival of products such as the *queso de Tandil*; the *vino de la costa de Berisso*; the *tomate platense*; the *salame quintero de Mercedes*; the *salame de Oncativo* in the Pampas region; or the *papa andina*; the *cordero patagónico*; the *chivito del norte neuquino* for non-pampas regions, among others, reflect a rural world that is no longer seen only as a supplier of materials consumer goods, but also as a source of intangibles and symbolic values, necessary for the development of the whole society.

This perspective is closely related to what many authors call local development and more specifically in rural areas, *rural territorial development* (Sili, 2005), a concept of development as being generated from local resources and capacities (Madoery, 2000).

Whereas the local rural development often has as a base of support a productive activity, our approach introduced into the study of SIAL through the so-called typical agri-food products. These products *...are spatially linked to a territory and culturally to customs or modes, with temporary settlement, and with special quality characteristics that differentiate it from other products* (Caldentey and Gomez, 1996).

II. SIAL implementation through typical agri-food products approach

In the study of SIAL, in the last ten years, it has been put the emphasis on various dimensions: some are more focused on the actors and collective action; on environmental issues and the correlation with biodiversity; and on the qualification of products and link to territorial dynamics; among others.

Based on previous studies on this topic and work experience carried out in the Faculty of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences - UNLP, some theoretical and methodological considerations will be taken into account for the identification, characterization and valuation of SIAL.

In this case, as mentioned above, it will be taken as the axis of the study or *front door*, the typical agri-food products.

1. Identification

Using primary and secondary information, are located those typical products that are potentially valued for their historic character, mode of production, social networks generated, spatial and environmental assets and consumer recognition. The logic is systemic and so in this initial recognition may include products and activities of different types that have an identity anchor.

2. Characterization (diagnosis)

It is based on the construction of a diagnosis that will lay the groundwork for a valuation project. As mentioned above, this article intends to enter the study of SIAL through typical food products. In that sense, we propose a number of variables and guiding questions to deepen in the diagnosis of these systems.

- a. *Production area*. Characterization: climate and soil. The product identified, has specific qualities determined by: climate and soil features of the production area? The use of native varieties of the area? Or specific production techniques?
- b. *The characteristics of the raw material*. Specific characteristics of the raw material impact on the finished product? Raw materials are obtained locally? Is there a local *know-how* regarding the production of this raw material?

- c. *Producers*. Which is the origin of the producers? Which are the volumes of production? Type of organization of production (family, business or association). Destination of production (subsistence, ceremonial, market).
- d. *History and reputation of the product*. When did the product begin to develop in the area? Who were the actors that introduced it? Which was the significance that the product had in the past? Is it a product in the food heritage of the community? People know it, identify with it? Is linked to traditional festivities? Is it identifiable with any community or ethnic group? Is it recognized as part of the history of the community? It evokes some historical period, certain experiences?
- e. *Methods of production / processing*. Are unique processing techniques used, related to a specific *know-how* of producers in the area? They bring different characteristics to the product? Is it uniform across all producers?
- f. *Marketing and consumption*. Is it consumed in the community? How are sales channels? Does it have any sign that distinguishes it in the market? Do consumers differentiate the products from similar? Through which attributes? Are the products known outside the community?
- g. *Presence of State*. Does it attend any State instance (local, provincial or national) in their activation? How? Producers know what the government makes or /and could make, or do not?

The techniques used in the search of information should include: a) participatory mechanisms (workshops, focus groups) to build a diagnosis in which the actors concerned are involved in what is later intended to be a proposal for activation / valuation of the product; b) combining qualitative -depth interviews with qualified informants (producers, historians, concerning institutions, traders, etc.), participant observation, interviews of self-confrontation (Theureau, 2002)- and quantitative techniques; c) and secondary information -census information, historical records (text and photographs).

3. *Valuation (activation)*

We understand by valuation process of a product, the continuation of actions that are intended to increase the importance of the product in the socio-economic dynamics of a particular territory. This process includes the formulation of projects or actions involving in their design, local actors and / or extra-local, financing, quality labels of origin, among other devices that help each situation according to economic and cultural valuation of the territories.

In that sense, then are posed a number of aspects -predisposing factors for the process- to be taken into account in the definition of the actions undertaken by actors involved in the project of valuation.

a. *Product Features*

The more typical characteristics a product possesses to ratify their specificity, the more clearer will be the *difference* respect to its closest substitute, and is more likely to be considered unique and valuable by consumers. The specificity thus, would be a factor that will positively influence the activation process of a product.

A company differentiated from its competitors if it can be unique in an asset to the buyers. The difference is the feature that allows a product suits from the consumer point of view, to the different market segments, and offer them the highest degree of satisfaction; and from the point of view of the producer, higher prices, approaching a situation of monopolistic competition (Caldentey *et al.* 1996).

Specificity, in this case refers to the element or set of characteristics that makes an agricultural or food product clearly distinguishable from other similar agricultural or agri-food products, belonging to the same category (Bérard and Marchenay, 1996). This will highlight some distinguishing features such as a particular geographical location of culture (some mountainous or coastal area or certain grasses consumed, some confluence of soil and climate factors) or a certain intrinsic characteristics of the product (plant or animal variety, a certain flavor or aroma, etc.), matching the specific product to a specific location (Bérard and Marchenay, 1996).

b. *Chains of typical products and its internal organization*

When referring to typical products that are in a process of activation, the respective chains have some specific and common features between them. We found a group of producers where each of them can be independent economically and legally, but all produce and/or market the same product. This property gives them the particularity of being able to act as one organization, because everyone is producing and/or marketing both raw materials and processed products with the same standards, and would be interested in sharing advertising and research expenses (Barjolle, Chappuis, Sylvander, 1998). Its market strategy is generally more efficient than the sum of each component, due to synergism generated.

The organization of producers and chain is one of the most important factors when assessing the chances of successful valuation of a product. Different studies that assess how the organization of the chain has an impact on product activation, analyzed the benefits of coordination of the following actions (Chappuis and Sans, 2000):

- The qualification of the product. This action covers both, the construction of the Quality Protocol as the control of the established rules; their particularities are set out in the following section. It is important that the definition of the product protocol (quality) is consistent with the objectives of market differentiation.
- Promoting the product. Most producers who produce typical products are not able to invest individually in advertising; promotion together is another function that could be found in these systems.
- The research and development. Improvements in quality, productivity, or any other type of improvement in the production-marketing process can be favored by studies and research. This action, as above, it is unlikely carried out individually because of the relatively small size of the firms, that makes them unable to invest in research but they might do it together.
- Political or institutional support. The support of political authorities and public institutions can be very important in the activation process of a product. Those chains that constituted for political authorities as the holders of a public interest project will have better access to political support.
- The existence of spaces of communication and learning between producers and / or technical support institutions (Universities, Extension Services, etc.) can facilitate learning processes, allowing improvements at different levels (production, marketing, etc.) (Otero, 2007).
- Joint purchase of inputs and infrastructure investment. A minimum internal organization can allow producers to enjoy some benefits of scale, reducing costs. This would also facilitate the activation of the product (Otero, 2007).

To the extent that the actions named, like others not mentioned here but of similar nature, are coordinated and carried out in an organized manner by the producers, the chain will have more opportunities to achieve some success in the valuation process of the product.

c. The qualification process

The qualification of products can be understood as a group of technical and socio-economic processes which are set by a system of actors; through which are given the conditions of production, processing and placing on the market for a given product (Cerdan and Sautier, 2002).

The qualification of a food product can be explained in two stages:

- **Product definition.** The same is done with the construction of the Quality Protocol, which sets all the rules related to the procurement of the product specified. It is one of the most important points in the negotiation of the actors. A very flexible protocol would allow the participation of a large number of firms offering a product with the same designation; this may confuse consumers and create situations of unequal competition between producers. In contrast, a very rigid protocol enhances the image of the product as unique and reduces the differences in processes between firms. (Chappuis and Sans, 2000).

- **Definition of the control structure of rules and penalties for violations.** These controls are necessary to ensure conformity with the rules laid down in the Quality Protocol. If a firm does not meet the standards and offers a quality product other than specified, all firms will be adversely affected. Checks can be made by internal and external institutions. (Chappuis and Sans, 2000).

When performing a Quality Protocol, seeks to standardize all the issues that affect product quality. According to Pons, standardization is aimed, firstly, the harmonization of the rules of preparation of food products, monitoring and promoting quality. He mentioned that is an essential instrument of transparency of markets and the codification of the methods of preparation of products (Pons, 2002).

The same author states that, among other things, the rule should be developed in a framework agreement involving all actors, and must reach the optimal benefit for the community as a whole. He also points out that standardization serves a triple objective:

- encourage collaboration between producers, distributors and consumers through the development and implementation of collective rules and removing barriers to trade;
- establish and differentiate the quality of products, goods and services;
- and ensure the protection of consumers.

In the case of typical products, the purpose is to protect and promote certain kinds of knowledge, or/and a specific production.

The qualification processes are rarely individual creations, because they need the successful coordination of a large number of actors who do not necessarily have an obvious interest. It is most of the times, a collective construction where institutions play the role of catalyst (Sylvander, 2001).

The qualification of a product is understood as a fundamental aspect in regard to the activation process. Product quality, their ability to meet the needs of consumers, will be determined mainly by the shape taken by the qualification, significantly affecting the product activation process.

III. Conclusions

In this paper we introduce the Localized Agro-alimentary Systems approach as an alternative for the study and development of rural territories, where it is recognized as a resource in this sense, culture and local economy associated with a typical food product.

This proposal is presented in a context where intensifies delocalization of production activities, process associated with the prevailing of technological packages and "new" forms of organizing production - "sowing pools" mainly. The proposed theory and method includes the steps of: a) identification, b) characterization and c) valuation, recognizing in each instance the concepts and variables to consider.

This proposal aims to contribute in the construction of territorial intelligence. We identify as territorial intelligence, the understanding necessary to articulate knowledge and experience in solving problems with the sharing of scientific and academic professionals and territorial actors; able to measure the nature of the problem, delimit their object of study and / or intervention, clarify the research methodology and tools, and systematizing the results of that interaction (Bozzano, 2009).

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