

Local Food, Local Identity and Local Image

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Abstract – Self-promotion and reinterpretation of local identity is becoming increasingly important in rural communities. The success of local image building varies greatly from region to region. The paper analyses the role of local food production in local identity creation and image building. Using the example of four Hungarian rural micro-regions we analyse how a local community presents itself through local food production.

Keywords: rural image, local food, Hungary, local community

INTRODUCTION²

The paper is based on the literature on local foods (Renting et al. 2012, Fonte 2010), and on the role of cultural heritage in rural development (Ray 1998, Bessiere 1998, Tellström et al 2005), and to contextualize the research, on the role of food self-provisioning in Central-Europe (Jehlicka-Smith 2011, Swain 2013, Benedek-Balázs 2015). Our aim is to develop a framework to understand the interconnections of rural image local food and local community building.

METHODS AND SOURCES

The case-studies were conducted as a part of a larger research on agricultural restructuring in the last two decades in Hungary. It is based on qualitative and anthropological methods: document-analysis, semi-structured interviews, transect walking and participatory observation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ORGANISING CONCEPTS

Our analysis use insights from Ray's theory on the role of culture in rural development (Ray 1998), on Tovey's concept on the role of knowledge in development initiatives (Tovey 2008), and finally offers a typology of local food production and local image building (Csurgó-Megyesi 2015).

RESULTS

The first case-study was conducted in the Western-Hungarian micro-region which has agricultural

traditions. Traditional products were fruits, vegetables, pork and dairy products. Now, the main products are arable crops and poultry. During the last two decades former socialist-type cooperatives and the system of household-farming collapsed. Different types of private farms became main agriculture actors. The paper focuses on the group of medium and small-scale farms, which are engaged in local food production, and on subsistence farms. The group of subsistence farmers is mixed: there are locals who always produced some vegetables, fruits, some animal products, former workers and urban people. Despite this diversity they have some common characteristics: they farm on small plots, produce mainly, but not exclusively, for self-consumption, thus have weak market relations. Their activity is labour-intensive, built on family networks and own labour force. The members of this group established a shop for local products, and aim at developing a farmers' market.

The micro-region has neither a local brand nor a typical local food product. However, there is a local initiative aiming at developing the market for already existing local products, like pumpkin oil, jams, honey, wine, cheese and dairy products, and local handicrafts (artisanal products and small-scale food products). A local civic association organizes the initiatives together with other local stakeholders: the LEADER LAG and the local thermal spa. The first case study demonstrates how an existing local community tries to build local image by using local food products, and how it fails without clear objectives.

The second case study was conducted in the Eastern part of Hungary, in Hajdú-Bihar County. Our study area, the Létavértes micro region, comprises ten settlements including two small towns. The most important sector of the economy is agriculture, which is quite stable and productive. However, the number of agricultural employees has dramatically dropped in the last two decades as a result of the collapse of former socialist-type cooperatives. Private firms and agricultural entrepreneurs became the main actors of local agriculture. The traditions of subsistence farming and food self-provisioning are very strong in the micro region, mostly in the small villages. The micro region is famous for the cultivation of horseradish, which became a PDO (protected designations of origin) in 2006. A big local firm and several medium and small-scale farmers are involved in horseradish production. Cooperation between horseradish producers is very strong, both in formal and informal ways.

Horseradish is regarded as the most important local tradition with several cultural aspects. Traditional local gastronomy provides several special horseradish based dishes. The Horseradish Tourist Route Association, a local civic association, was established by eight local governments, four horseradish producers and a local restaurant. Several other local actors (cultural centres,

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schools, civic associations, etc.) are involved in the activity of the association. They published a brochure for tourists presenting local horseradish culture and other cultural heritage of the joint settlements. They organise a Horseradish Day, Horseradish Fest as cultural events in every year, and a Horseradish Roundtable to negotiate roles and opportunities of horseradish in local development. The case presents how local actors try to develop tourism by building local image and a local food product parallel, but the result of their initiative is community and local identity building, as an unintended outcome.

The third case study site, Órség is located in the Western part of Hungary, along the Austrian and Slovenian borders. The western frontier location resulted in a special status for the region with higher degree of control and lower degree of development during the socialist era. As a result of this, the area kept its untouched natural environment, unique landscape, special settlement structure, and traditional houses.

From the late 80's and most significantly after the change of political system in 1990, Órség became one of the main tourism destinations for middle upper classes demanding rural idyll. Year after year more and more urban inhabitants bought second homes in Órség, and many of them stay there from spring to autumn or settled down permanently. They were the pioneers and initiators of new tourism activities. As a result of tourism development several elements of traditional local food and gastronomy appeared in tourism services. Landscape and food interconnected. The most traditional local food is the pumpkin oil, it has the so called Órség label, but recently there are several other local food products, from honey and mushroom through marmalade and pretzel to snaps provided in gift shops and local markets for tourists. Órség as a landscape became a label of rural idyll, and also local food represents it, which means that local food is connected to the symbolic meaning of the place. The case presents a successful initiative to connect local food, local image and local identity building.

The fourth study area is the Kalocsa micro region in Bács-Kiskun County, in South-Central Hungary. Kalocsa and its surrounding villages are famous for the colourful flower motifs of the ornamental painting and embroidery and also the emblematic local food product: paprika. Kalocsa is one of the main Hungarian paprika-production regions. This product, the so called 'red gold', is essential in the culinary culture and the traditional image of Hungary. Local identity and image are very strong in Kalocsa region. Paprika, along with other local heritage products, is presented in museums, folk art centres, village centres where the visitors are not only locals but also outsiders. Kalocsa Paprika Days fest happens every year. However, local food heritage stepped out from its original local circumstance and it represents Hungarian traditions and identity outside the

country. It is one of the main Hungaricum which is well-known all over the world. Paprika products and related traditional cultivation practices can strengthen the local identity but their symbolic meaning related to Hungarian national identity detached from the locality. The last case study presents how strong local food product became national image element without positively effecting local producers and the local community.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper analysed in four micro-regions local food, the process of local image, community and identity building, and the interaction among these processes. We have two main findings: 1.) food products and relating local events cannot create themselves a robust and well-marketable local image outside the region, but may contribute to local identity building. The success of such initiatives is dependent on the characteristics of food products and the human resources beyond the initiatives. Our second main finding is that there is a mutual effect among local food, local image and local identity. Our results suggest that the parallel development of the three element results successful local food initiatives, visible local image and strong local identity.

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