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Mediterranean Diet: a multidisciplinary approach to a new territorial strategy

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Abstract – Mediterranean Diet (MD) integrates territorial diversities, economic and lifestyle changes. These characteristics represent an enormous potential, for a sustainable food pattern and healthy lifestyles, biodiversity and to valorisation of local products. In 2013 Portugal joined the UNESCO MD application for Intangible Cultural Heritage. The University of Algarve, in a partnership with the Competence Centre for the Mediterranean Diet, 4 Regional Agriculture Directorates of mainland Portugal, Tavira City Council (Representative Community) and the Higher Education Institutions’ Network for MD Safe-guard, developed a set of activities with the aim of strengthening the national strategy for MD promotion and safeguard. The activities aimed to raise awareness of the MD characteristics in each territory and to enable effective articulation within the main stakeholders, in a quadruple helix – Agriculture, Health, Heritage and Tourism. It was possible to gather a wide range of actors with responsibility in preservation and promotion of MD in each Region. The created working groups are developing further work leading to a safeguard strategy for MD in each Region and the set-up of Regional Commissions for MD (CRDMs). Results point out the relevance of geographical indications (GI) registration of regional characteristic products as a key factor for MD safeguard.

Keywords – Mediterranean Diet; Safeguard; Local products; Geographical indications; Territorial cohesion; Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Mediterranean Diet (MD) is a complex concept that represents a philosophy and a way of life based on sharing, sociality, creativity, celebration, and hospitality. Long-term travelling and exchanges over centuries of History, together with the harsh landscape around the Mediterranean perpetuated an intangible cultural heritage, shared by the surrounding countries and by Portugal, which being geographically Atlantic, receives its influence and is culturally Mediterranean.

UNESCO inscribed MD on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013. It is now important to safeguard and to promote MD, through a persistent intervention near populations, based on a deep knowledge of the characteristics of each territory related to MD, to raise the awareness of different stakeholders, including agriculture, health, tourism, regional authorities, educational communities, public administration, and economic agents.

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diversity that MD assumes in different Portuguese regions, it became necessary to deepen the knowledge about MD in the main regions.

The regional features within the main concept of MD were identified during preliminary studies so that it may be disseminated in each region based on its diversity, characteristics, and actual needs.

The promotion of close coordination between different MD players in each region is the aim of this project, to establish a referential defining MD criteria and parameters, to increase knowledge, safeguard, and valorisation of the country’s natural and cultural diversity, as a way of simultaneously promoting regional development and territorial cohesion.

GI have been reported as a key factor for product demand and differentiation, therefore, one of our goals is to promote IG attribution to products associated with MD in each Portuguese Region (Stasi, 2011).

The main objective of this project was to strengthen national MD safeguard and promotion strategy. The present work aims to evidence the relevance of GIs in achieving this goal.

METHODOLOGY

The University of the Algarve (UAlg), in a partnership with the Competence Centre for the Mediterranean Diet (CCDM), four Regional Agriculture Directorates (DRAPs) of mainland Portugal (Alentejo, Lisbon and Tagus Valley (LTV), Centre and North), Tavira City Council and the Higher Education Institutions’ Network for MD Safeguard (RIESDM), developed a set of activities with the aim of strengthening the national strategy for the promotion and MD safeguard. These activities aimed to raise awareness of the characteristics associated with MD in each territory and to enable effective articulation within the main stakeholders, using a quadruple helix approach – Agriculture, Health, Heritage and Tourism, and were as follows:

- Definition of a methodology to identify the specific characteristics of MD in each of the country’s regions and to enable regional actors to plan and implement a strategy to strengthen its safeguarding.
- Promotion of focus groups and work sessions, with the different players in each region, to debate MD and to create an agreement on how to apply this concept to the different regions.
- Planning each region’s further work, promoting the creation of Regional CRDMs and preparation of each region’s strategic documents for MD safeguarding and promotion.

The results in each region’s group were submitted to content analysis to quantify those related to GI. The progress of each region’s working group action is monitored in periodical meetings.

RESULTS

Activities began by the identification and invitation to the entities to participate in the focus group and working sessions. In October 2020, the webinar “Mediterranean Diet and territory development” gathered 200 participants.

Focus group (72 participants from 57 entities) and work sessions (74 participants from 52 entities), from the 4 regions of Alentejo, LTV, Centro and Norte took place in November and December 2020, based on original scripts. The documents (scripts and final templates), participants' list (including the entities each one represented), conclusions and assessment results are published in open access (Mateus, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Freitas, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Follow-up meetings involving representatives from the UAlg, Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Algarve, Direção-Geral de Agricultura e Desenvolvimento Rural, DRAPs and other participant entities, concluded that, although with different paces, the plan scheduled is accomplished and the information produced is being included in the regional's strategic plans (Freitas, 2021a).

Similarly, the *Plano de Atividades para a Salvaguarda da Dieta Mediterrânica na Região do Algarve, 2018-2021* (UAlg, 2018) and the *Plano de Atividades da RIESDM 2020-2023* are currently being used as support for the development of each regional plan (Freitas et al, 2021).

Strategic goals defined for each region show the different visions of regional products identification and characterization and among them, those in "Agriculture and food systems" consistently converge towards future GI registration (Table1).

Table 1. GI related strategic goals, initiatives and actions identified in each region

	Goals		Initiatives		Actions	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Alentejo	8	67	12	80	14	54
LTV	11	92	7	58	11	50
Centre	10	83	8	67	6	27
North	8	67	8	88	9	38

The number of strategic goals, initiatives, and of actions that may develop into GI registration identified in each region is presented in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

Despite the very different departing points in each region, concerning their general acknowledgment of the MD concept and of each one's own related characteristics, the strategy of disseminating the Algarve region's previous experience provided a solid background for the work.

Region representatives had clear differences on the understanding of their region's perceptions over GI relevance. However, the goals, initiatives and actions defined as strategic are aligned with the recognition of the importance of GI for product protection and MD safeguard.

CONCLUSION

It was possible to gather a wide range of players with responsibility in the preservation and promotion of MD in each Region. The created working groups are developing further work leading to the implementation of a safeguard strategy for MD in each Region and the set-up of CRDMs. Despite using

different approaches and identifying different aims, each region representative group pointed out the interest in several GI registration intentions.

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