Make mine Darjeeling: Locally identified foods promote sustainable development, UN study finds

Not just any peppers, but white Penja peppers, grown in volcanic soil in the Cameroon; not just any cabbage, but Futog cabbage, cultivated alongside the Danube in Serbia. The rising number of products with a specific and certified geographic origin, it turns out, not only have cachet among gourmands: they are also providing large economic and social benefits to rural areas and can foster sustainable development, according to a new study released by the UN agriculture agency.

Food products with trademarked geographical labels, which have specific qualities or reputations tied to their place of origin, already account for annual trade of more than $50 billion worldwide, according to the report, Strengthening sustainable food systems through geographical indications, by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

The concept is not new: products from Bordeaux wine to Parmigiano cheese have had protected labeling for decades or centuries. But the idea is spreading and such products are taking off throughout developing countries and regions.

“Geographical indications are an approach to food production and marketing systems that place social, cultural and environment considerations at the heart of the value chain,” said Emmanuel Hidier, Senior Economist in FAO’s Investment Centre.

“They can be a pathway to sustainable development for rural communities by promoting quality products, strengthening value chains, and improving access to more remunerative markets,” he added.

The report analyzes the economic impact of Geographical Indication registration in nine case studies: Colombian coffee, Darjeeling tea (India), Futog cabbage (Serbia), Kona coffee (United States), Manchego cheese (Spain), Penja pepper (Cameroon), Taliouine saffron (Morocco), Tête de Moine cheese (Switzerland) and Vale dos Vinhedos wine (Brazil).

For example, it reveals that by registering Penja pepper – grown in the Penja Valley’s volcanic soil in Cameroon and the first African product to receive the label – local farmers have increased their incomes six-fold.
“The process – from setting standards to registration and promotion – has benefited not only local farmers, but the whole local area in terms of revenues, productivity, the growth of other connected industries, and importantly, the inclusion of all stakeholders,” said Emmanuel Nzenowo, from the Penja Pepper producers’ association.

Gains from labeling surpass finances alone. The practice can also stimulate public-private sector dialogue, the report notes, as authorities are often associated closely with the registration and certification process.

While each country defines its own laws for registering their labels, they are regulated and protected under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, an international legal agreement among World Trade Organization members.

The report also recognizes potential pitfalls. Some small-scale or traditional producers may be excluded, for example, if specifications are overly complex. Environmental impacts must also be weighed and minimized.

But overall, the study finds, geographic labeling has had significant positive effects on prices of the trademarked goods, whether long-established or recently registered.

“The unique linkages of these products with their natural and cultural resources in local areas make them a useful tool in the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular by preserving a food heritage and contributing to healthy diets,” said Florence Tartanac, Senior Officer in the FAO Nutrition and Food Systems Division.