



'Because of its size, it's not worth it!': The viability of small-scale geographical indication schemes

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ABSTRACT

We analyse the theoretical tenets underpinning geographical indications (GIs) and seek to determine whether the number of producers engaged in them matters. To do so, we develop a qualitative methodology to focus on two small-scale cheese productions located in mountain areas endowed with a GI: Cebreiro (Galicia, NW Spain) and Tolminc (Slovenia). In both instances, just two dairies actively produce the GI-certified cheeses; yet, the two case studies differ greatly. In Cebreiro, the GI is seen as an opportunity for development, but the scant number of producers compromises its sustainability. In Tolminc, the GI is monopolised by one company and offers few benefits for the many disengaged producers throughout the region. We conclude that the number of producers engaged in a GI scheme is not a critical factor in their success; rather, public institutional support and the presence/absence of a GI producers' management structure are pivotal.

1. Introduction

Research into geographical indications (GIs) for food has been gaining momentum over the last 20 years. Within a rhetorical context of a transition towards a green economy and the enhancement of quality products, granting GIs has been widely seen as useful for overcoming trends towards the increasing concentration and industrialisation of mainstream agriculture (Barham and Sylvander, 2011; Lamarque and Lambin, 2015). Moreover, GIs have been intensively promoted as a means for rural development (Sylvander et al., 2011; Krystallis et al., 2017). However, their outcomes are highly dependent on the way they are constructed, managed and articulated by actors operating in their respective communities (Fonte, 2008). In parallel, GIs are quite often criticised in the sense that they are seen as spatial monopolies, arguably promoting exclusionary and defensive localism practices (Goodman et al., 2012; Hegnes, 2019). Thus, a rural development *vis-à-vis* monopoly dichotomy is latent in much of the GI literature, albeit few papers have addressed this debate directly to date (for exceptions, see Goodman, 2004; Tregear, 2011).

Much of the literature in this field focuses on large GI productions,¹ such as Parmigiano Reggiano (De Roest and Menghi, 2000) and Comté

(Bowen, 2010; 2011) cheeses, with approximately 6,000 and 3,200 producers, respectively, involved in each. However, studies of GIs involving only a small number of producers are scarce. Indeed, based on a review of more than 100 papers analysing specific GIs carried out herein, we have detected just one, Belletti et al., (2017a: 253), that *intentionally* highlights their objective of focusing on 'a very small production system, where a few small farms are using a GI' — albeit they actually include a total of 23 registered farmers in their case-study of the Sorana bean. We further identified two studies — May (2017) and Leonhardt and Sidali (2017) — that deal with GIs that comprise just one or two producers, but this feature was not specifically highlighted in their respective discussions. This focus is quite remarkable, given that according to the European Commission's (2021) evaluation of GIs, small-scale² indications account for 48 % of the total number of GIs in the European Union (EU).

Given this obvious gap in the research, in this paper we seek to elucidate if the limited size of a GI — in terms, more specifically, of the small number of producers involved in the scheme — matters. What impact does this have, for example, on its governance? Can small-scale GIs deliver benefits to the region in which they are embedded, and/or do they constitute a monopoly for the few producers engaged in them? The

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¹ Note, however, that data on the number of producers using a given GI are not always available via official registers.

² The European Commission defines 'small-scale' GIs as those with a sales value of less than EUR 1 million. It does not, however, specifically consider the total number of producers engaged in this definition.

question is of evident relevance given the growing political interest in GIs and the fact that public bodies have to go to considerable lengths to register a GI, and while this public support is broadly accepted in the case of large-scale GIs, it is often questioned in the case of their smaller counterparts (Belletti et al., 2017a; European Commission, 2021). To address these questions, we report two case studies of small-scale cheese productions in mountain areas: Cebreiro (Galicia, NW Spain) and Tolmin³ (Slovenia), with just two active producers of certified cheeses involved in the respective GI schemes. By 'producer' we refer to cheese-making producers officially registered in their respective protected designations of origin; however, it should be noted that these producers may also be milk producers, though not exclusively.

In what follows, we undertake a theoretical study of GIs, first, by examining the arguments forwarded to justify their existence and the implications they have had for certain geographical areas, and, second, by summarising the main criticisms raised against them. We then present and justify the two case studies analysed herein and describe the materials and methods employed in this study. After advancing the results for each case study, we discuss the impact the GIs have had in both areas in terms of development. Finally, we conclude by reflecting as to whether small-scale GIs are worth protecting.

2. Understanding GIs: Their Justification, criticisms and insights into their governance

2.1. Justification: From trade regulation to rural development and multifunctionality

The roots of the GI scheme lie in efforts to tie specific products to their geographical origin, based on the assumption that consumers are willing to pay a price premium to maintain those links (Belletti et al., 2015, 2017b; Gangjee, 2017). As such, the primary justification for GIs — and one that can be traced back to their very origins in the 18th century — concerns matters of market regulation: the fight against unfair competition, imitations and fraud in relation to guarantees of food origin and processing (Sylvander et al., 2011; Teil, 2017). Since the very first GIs, the State's role in protecting and providing consumers with guarantees of the food-place of origin link has been critical, especially as far as trade and exports are concerned, as illustrated by Port and Chianti wines (Meloni and Swinnen, 2018). Today, GIs continue to generate consumer trust, even when they find themselves distant from producers (Tregear et al., 2016). Indeed, Benkahla et al. (2005) and Mancini (2013) claim that the main strength of GIs is their ability to increase their market scope beyond that of the purely local scale. De Filippis et al. (2022), based on a meta-analysis of GIs and trade, conclude that the establishment of a GI has positive effects for the internationalisation of markets.

Given their basis on inimitable resources, as defined by their geographical origin, GIs are widely justified as an instrument for endogenous rural development (Ray, 2000; Woods, 2010). Indeed, the association between GIs and development constitutes the second justification for their existence: first, because GIs serve to both valorise and differentiate specific productions from mass commodities and, so, generate added-value at the local scale (Woods, 2010; Cei et al., 2021; Duvaleix et al., 2021); and, secondly, because they are supposed to avoid competition with extra-local actors, thus creating a niche market (Kizos and Vakoufaris, 2011; Vergamini et al., 2019). Two paradigmatic cases where the GI-rural development link is especially evident are provided by the GIs of the Parmigiano Reggiano and Comté cheeses. According to De Roest and Menghi (2000), the former has allowed producers to obtain higher prices than those paid for similar productions; and the

recognition of labour-intensive and artisan techniques has helped stabilise employment in the region through the maintenance of small farms. Similar findings are reported by Bowen (2010; 2011) for the latter GI, who further stresses that the designation has allowed local producers to maintain economic control over the resource by keeping external companies out.

The third justification for GIs concerns their externalities, that is, the positive effects they have in the wider rural context in which they are embedded (Barjolle et al., 2011; Sylvander et al., 2011). Thus, GIs are typically considered as multifunctional (Sonnino, 2007; Belletti et al., 2015). The protection afforded by GIs ensures the maintenance of the resources — i.e. the traditions, heritage, landscape, etc. — in those areas in which they are based. These resources, in turn, constitute precious assets for other economic activities, primarily tourism (Bessièrè, 2013; Marcoz et al., 2016). Multiple examples of mountain cheese productions across Europe highlight the reciprocal nature of these linkages (McMorran et al., 2015; Pachoud et al., 2020). Typically, in these settings, cattle grazing maintains the high pastures, a landscape that is especially valued by people visiting the area while, by buying the mountain cheeses, these tourists help sustain farming in the area. Indeed, the valorisation of GI products can contribute to the construction, branding and promotion of their regions (Forney and Häberli, 2016; Tregear et al., 2016).

Beyond any obvious economic valorisation, GIs can be considered multifunctional in their capacity to preserve local resources on the grounds of their intrinsic value, including specific know-how and traditions that can be conceptualised as cultural heritage and, thus, form part of the inhabitants' shared identity (Kizos and Vakoufaris, 2011; Bessièrè, 2013). Réviron and Chappuis (2011) and Belletti and Marescotti (2011) highlight the importance of the creation of identity in boosting collective actions and innovation in rural communities. As regards innovation, Sanz and Macías (2005) report that Spanish olive oil GIs favour the inter-organisation of stakeholders, the dissemination of knowledge and, ultimately, the adoption of environmental practices as applied to food processing. Indeed, from an environmental perspective, GIs have a positive impact on the protection of specific indigenous breeds (plants, cattle, etc.) and the sustainability of agrarian ecosystems (Belletti et al., 2015; Lamarque and Lambin, 2015).

2.2. Criticisms and Debates: Are GIs Exclusionary?

Despite the justifications forwarded in support of their existence, GIs have also come in for considerable criticism. The first set of complaints concerns the fact that not all the producers of a specific food in a delimited region participate in the GI. This seems to be attributable to the fact that these producers consider the scheme to be unprofitable (Bouamra-Mechemache and Chaaban, 2010; Belletti et al., 2015). Indeed, many of these reluctant producers appear to see few incentives to join the GI scheme, especially when the rules of production hinder their meeting the standards required for certification (Barjolle et al., 2017; Pachoud et al., 2019). This is of particular relevance in the case of small-scale producers (Pachoud et al., 2019), and calls into question the assumption that GIs serve to provide them with support in the face of competition from larger producers (Marie-Vivien, 2010; Parasecoli, 2017).

Moreover, Du Puis and Goodman (2005) develop a thesis — so-called 'unreflexive localism' — with which they also question the potential of GIs to benefit local communities, since they contend that they favour reduced groups or local elites within these communities. Several GIs have been reported in which small-scale producers have been displaced by larger, more powerful actors, who take over the product's supply chain (Bowen and Zapata, 2009; Mancini, 2013). Other reasons why small producers can feel excluded is when the leading role is taken by scientific knowledge (Fonte, 2008), rural development professionals (Tregear et al., 2016), local/regional governments (Tregear et al., 2007) or even by the State (Rangnekar, 2011).

³ Tolmin is the place-name of the main town and municipality where the cheese is produced. Tolminc is an adjective meaning 'of Tolmin' and the name registered as the GI.

GIs have also been accused of being exclusionary because of their geographically bounded nature. Demossier (2011) and May (2017) suggest that, by defining certain limits, producers situated immediately adjacent to the GI border can feel excluded. Meanwhile, Goodman (2004) criticises GIs on the grounds that they generate quasi-monopoly rents precisely because of their strict delimitation. In this sense, Moraes-Faus and Sonnino (2012: 231), in their study of the olive oil sector of Alto Palancia (Spain), note that an overly narrow and excessively strong link of production with the local area can hamper the creation of larger economic spaces that would provide more ‘opportunities for a range of quality food producers and other rural actors’.

However, the fiercest critics of GIs are in the USA, where they are branded as protectionist tools that distort the free market by strangling competition, prescribing the usage of geographical names in product names and even creating a monopoly for European products (Hughes, 2006; Osgood and Feng, 2018). Guthman (2007), moreover, considers that GIs favour the commoditisation of place-based moral values, in an appraisal that echoes David Harvey’s (2002) critique on the commodification of tradition in order to extract monopoly rents.

The critics of GIs have been contested by their proponents who consider them a form of ‘collective intellectual property’ (Sylvander et al., 2011). As such, they claim they belong to the regions in which they are located, given the collective nature of those who contribute to establishing the reputation of a given food (Duvaleix et al., 2021). This means that everyone within the production area that complies with the specific regulations of production has a right to use it. This line of argument implies guaranteeing fair and equitable representation of stakeholders, and adhering to the necessary governance structures regulating GIs to achieve legitimacy (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Sylvander et al., 2011). French law is widely seen as paradigmatic in this sense, requiring producer organisations to assume a key role in the democratic management of GIs (Marie-Vivien, 2010, 2019).

3. Selection of case studies and methods

The two GI case studies conducted here have been selected in line with the following criteria: (a) the small number of producers associated with each; (b) their location in mountain areas facing problems of out-migration and ageing (Steinicke et al., 2012; Lois and Paül, 2016); and (c) their protection of productions of cheese made from cow’s milk enjoying the same GI status within the EU scheme. Their eventual selection was, however, dictated by the researchers’ prior knowledge of the existence of these two productions and their previous research experience.

We opt here to employ the number of producers as an indicator of small-scale GIs as opposed to other criteria — e.g., production volume or land area — because this indicator is more closely related to the aims of this research, that is, our focus on issues concerning governance and monopolies. The figures in both instances were available via the web services of the respective public institutions: DOP Cebreiro | Portal da Consellería do Medio Rural (xunta.gal) and <https://storitve-mkkgp.gov.si/esk-zunanji/#/dashboard>. Thus, we have identified four producers in the case of Cebreiro,⁴ and two in that of Tolminc.

In identifying the two case studies as constituting mountain areas — Cebreiro, located in the Western Cantabrian Mountains; Tolminc in the Eastern Alps — we employed the definition of mountain regions provided by the HIGHLANDS.3 project. By focusing our study on mountain regions, we make various assumptions regarding the object of our study:

- they are likely to present high levels of biodiversity, landscape heterogeneity and richness of cultural traditions related to small-scale agriculture (McMorran et al., 2015),
- they are likely to be depopulated areas of the Global North, with few active producers (Wymann von Dach and Ruiz Peyré, 2020), and
- they are likely to exploit their designation as GIs as development instruments (Ceï et al., 2021).

Both productions are embedded in EU legislation and currently hold the same GI category — i.e. a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), the most restrictive version of GIs in the EU (Thévenod and Marie-Vivien, 2011). Cebreiro achieved its European designation in 2004, while Tolminc did so in 2012, although both had previously been designated GIs under national schemes. The respective characteristics of the two case study areas and their productions are shown in Table 1 and Fig. 1.

A qualitative methodology, exploiting semi-structured interviews, was adopted to examine the perceptions and strategies of stakeholders associated with the PDO cheese productions in both cases studies. We contacted cheese producers — both engaged (n = 5) and disengaged (n = 6) from the GI —, milk farmers (n = 7), rural development officers (n = 3), researchers (n = 1), politicians (n = 1) and the technical staff of a PDO Regulatory Board⁵ (n = 1); some participants fell into more than one of these categories. In total, 19 people were interviewed: 8 in Tolminc

Table 1
Basic characterisation of the Tolminc and Cebreiro GI areas.

	Tolminc PDO area	Cebreiro PDO area	Sources
Altitude range (m. a.s.l.)	126–2780	200–1935	Copernicus Land Monitoring Service (2022): https://land.copernicus.eu/
Land area (km ²)	942	2,332	Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of Slovenia (2022): e-Surveying data (gov.si) / Government of Galicia (2022): Información Xeográfica de Galicia (xunta.gal)
Population	18,234	22,346	SIStat (2021): http://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/en/Dat a/-/05C4008S.px / IGE (2020): Nomenclátor estatístico de Galicia (ige.gal)
Population density (inhab./km ²)	19.3	9.6	Own data based on above sources
Tourism	Hiking, rafting and music festivals	Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James)	Kozorog (2011)/ Fernández et al. (2021)
GI cheese production volumes (T)	130	39.6	Ogorevc (2007)/ Consellería de Medio Rural (2022): DOP Cebreiro Portal da Consellería do Medio Rural (xunta.gal)
Evolution in production volumes (2012–2022)	No information	+173 %	Consellería de Medio Rural (2022): DOP Cebreiro Portal da Consellería do Medio Rural (xunta.gal)
Cheese price (€) per kilo	15	12 (fresh) 18 (mature)	Own data based on fieldwork

⁴ Officially, there are four cheese-producers registered in the Cebreiro Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). However, during fieldwork it became apparent that only two of them continue to be active producers. We conducted interviews with these two active producers as well as with one cheese-maker no longer producing PDO cheese.

⁵ In Spain, this institution, with separate legal personality, is mandatory for the management of every GI.

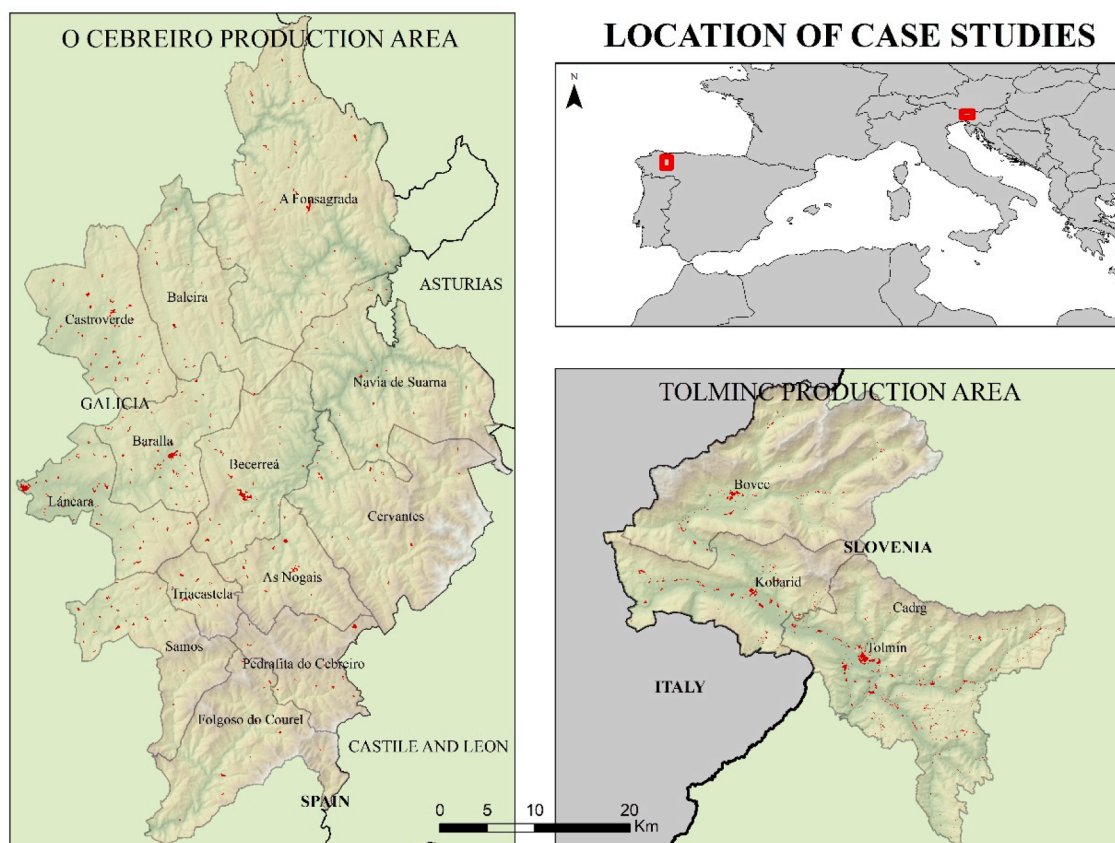


Fig. 1. Case-study areas.

and 11 in Cebreiro. Some informants were accessed via so-called *gatekeepers* (Valentine, 2005), while the remaining participants were contacted directly. In accordance with the regulations of the public funder of this research, and with the procedures established by the ethics commission of the university to which the researchers are affiliated, the anonymity of the participants is guaranteed. Therefore, in what follows, we employ pseudonyms when attributing statements to our interviewees.

Interviews were conducted in adherence with Valentine's (2005) guidelines and included a prepared interview schedule. First, general topics were raised — e.g., description of the area, characteristics of the product —, followed by more specific themes related to the aims of this study — e.g., perceptions about the impact and consequences of the GI, its governance and management. The last themes raised in the interviews were once again more general — e.g., opinions about the future of cheese production and of the GI. A number of *forbidden* words were pre-established, in line with Cameron's (2016) conventions, in order to avoid anticipating concepts and so as to acknowledge the spontaneous significance given to them by interviewees. For the purpose of this article, these words were: 'small/tiny', 'tourism', 'tradition/heritage' and 'nature'. If the words did not emerge naturally in the course of the interview, they were specifically introduced before concluding the conversation.

The data collected were coded inductively, applying both 'emic' and 'etic' codes (Crang, 2005), where the former refer to concepts and ideas expressed by the informants themselves, while the latter are assigned by the researchers. The information was then clustered following a relational approach, with the aim of highlighting the relations and interactions between the codes (Glückler and Panitz, 2021). This analysis of connections helped to identify central elements in each of our case studies (Glückler and Panitz, 2021) and to assess the relevance of both the GI and the actors involved. Based on this method, we opt to structure

our results for each case study as follows: (i) opinions concerning the establishment of the GI; (ii) the perceived role of the companies thus engaged; (iii) perceptions regarding GI management and governance; and (iv) the alleged impact of the GI within the region.

4. Results

4.1. Tolminc

Production in the Tolmin area consists of two interlinked farming systems: on the one hand, many farms produce and deliver milk to the cooperative-owned Planika Dairy, the main actor producing certified-GI Tolminc cheese; on the other, many of the same farmers also produce their own cheese following traditional methods during the summer months in their *planinas* (Alpine pastures with small huts where they keep and milk their cattle), but this cheese does not carry the GI label. Fig. 1 shows the linkages between the region's various actors according to the clustering of participants in the interviews conducted herein.

• Establishment of the GI

The Planika Dairy Cooperative is widely seen as playing a leading role in the regulation of the Tolminc GI. Allegedly, during the 1990 s, they entered into a commercial battle with a company from another Slovenian region which sought to appropriate the geographical name; however, in 2002, Planika registered *Tolminc* as a collective trademark, an achievement that is perceived as something of a success by the informants. In parallel, the cooperative entered into collaboration with the Tolminc Cheese Society — made up of local agencies, public institutions and some farmers — to pilot a project that could lead to the creation of a GI. The aim of these stakeholders was to promote the product, and so improve their profits, and to prevent 'people abroad from producing it'

(Jan). The outcome of these manoeuvres resulted in two Tolmincs: Planika's own trademark cheese and a GI cheese. The interviewees explain that, basically, the trademark cheese is produced from pasteurised milk, while the GI cheese can only be commercialised as such if produced from raw or thermalised milk and, importantly, from milk from the designated region and from cows fed fodder also from the designated region (see Fig. 2). Raw milk was included in the product specification in order that the *planinas* might be incorporated in the GI.

- *Companies Engaged in the GI*

Planika is the main producer of certified Tolminc cheese, selling it throughout Slovenia, commercialising both the GI and the trademark, allegedly without any great price differential. Planika's interviewees indicate that the GI contributes to the company's reputation as a quality food producer and it is widely considered as the firm that has benefited most from the GI.

The informants share a largely positive perception of Planika's role in the area. They explain how it has encouraged small family farms of the Tolmin area — many of them providing only part-time employment — to stay in business, as the cooperative guarantees them a good price for their milk. The company also provides farmers with technical support and transport facilities to collect milk even in the most remote villages. Informants from the Planika Dairy Cooperative describe how the company has also helped maintain activity in the traditional Alpine pastures, since the cooperative is happy to allow some of its suppliers to opt out of their agreement during the summer months to go and work on the *planinas*.

However, some of the interviewees see Planika as 'monopolising' cheese production in the area. For example, Danijela considers that the company leaves few opportunities for small farms to start making cheese; indeed, other than the Planika Dairy Cooperative, only one other maker of Tolminc Cheese GI is mentioned. Vincent, moreover, warns of the risks of depending on just one company if the suppliers want to be sure of earning a fair price for their milk. It is also felt that Planika takes advantage of the *planinas* tradition in the marketing of their production, in the sense that they are capitalising on the region's heritage. By way of example, they cite the museum run by the cooperative explaining the cheese making process.

- *GI Management and Governance*

The general lack of engagement with the GI is seen by some as a 'sad story' or a 'disaster'. Peter, a rural development professional, analyses the situation as follows:

Every cheese-maker in the region needs to get involved. Now I can't promote Tolminc cheese because there is just one [producer] [sic] in the certification scheme. One out of ten. It cannot work like that. Because all the marketing can't rely on one person. That's one of the problems if they don't all join in the certification scheme [...]. Because it's origin protected, if you're not part of the certification, you can't produce Tolminc. Now we have locked ourselves out. (Peter)

Various informants believe the situation has come about because local farmers — including the *planinas* — see no advantage in forming part of the GI, as they maintain the same level of sales, at roughly the same price, as they can demand outside the scheme. Indeed, many producers stress that they sell most of their cheese locally, to the local population and tourists and report that, given that these customers are familiar with the product, certification seems unnecessary. Thus, many farmers prefer to remain on the sidelines. In a particular village in the valley, three family farms used to form part of the scheme under a common commercial brand, but they opted to leave seeing no advantage from taking part. Instead, the GI is perceived by these informants as a 'cost' and a 'complication': extra work 'for nothing'. Moreover, GI

inspections are frowned upon, as if the inspectors were 'suspicious' about the authenticity of their cheesemaking methods.

Various farmers who used to form part of the GI scheme complained, moreover, that its regulations tended to be too strict — for instance, establishing a given weight for the cheese when they preferred working with smaller units. In this case, the scheme is perceived as a failure in the sense that it has not been able to accommodate these farmers' needs when they formed part of the certification. However, the possibility of modifying and adapting GI specifications to their requests was not mentioned.⁶ The following statement from a disengaged farmer is revealing in this respect:

I think that the biggest problem with Tolminc cheese is it must weigh 4 kg and must be two months old [...] but if you make it smaller, 3.5 kg, then that's not Tolminc because it is not 'the right size'. I don't know who wrote these specifications [...], some guys from down in the valley [...], clever guys. (Andrej)

There is no reported regulatory body or structure for the management of the GI, where such amendments to GI specifications would typically be negotiated. The Tolminc Cheese Society, which represented stakeholders' interests when the application for a GI was being made, is no longer operative. Control of the GI is in the hands of its registered companies, while it is audited by an outside private firm. The absence of any GI governing structure is also reported to affect the organisation of promotional campaigns. The interviewees expressed their regret about this situation but identified different underlying causes. Some producers, for example, complained about the lack of government support to promote Tolminc cheese, whereas the rural development officers stressed it was up to the farmers to organise joint promotional activities.

- *Impact in the Region*

Jan believes that, while most farmers have not joined the GI scheme, EU recognition has benefitted the reputation of the product and indirectly contributed to increasing the price paid for the cheese both inside and outside the GI. The certification label is also used in campaigns promoting tourism in the Tolmin area. However, the main tourist asset in the region remains the *planinas* — the mountain farms. Several informants reported that tourists come to hike and see the cows grazing in these high pastures. The tourist activity has positive connotations for most of the interviewees, representing an important channel of sales for the cheese — that is, sold directly in the *planinas* — and as a window to promote the product abroad. According to Jan, a rural development professional:

It is very interesting for tourists to see this old tradition for making cheese in the mountains, so this is a very positive influence on tourism and also tourists come to try and buy these cheeses. (Jan)

Furthermore, the use of these pastures, as described by the producers, is an optimal way to make use of all available land, leaving the meadows further down the mountain slopes for producing winter hay. Some interviewees, both farmers and rural development officers, expressed a certain environmental awareness as regards farming in these areas, assuming that herding helps to maintain the landscape open and to preserve the pastures and its plethora of flora. Additionally, since cheese-making on the *planinas* is seen as a long tradition, farmers continue the activity there as part of their cultural heritage and identity. However, all these positive connotations have no reported relation with the GI. Paradoxically, although the GI is justified by the existence of the *planinas*, the latter cannot call their cheese Tolminc because they do not hold the GI.

⁶ It is worth noting that Article 53 of EU Regulation 1151/2012 guarantees the possibility of amending GI specifications when requested to do so by a 'group having a legitimate interest'.

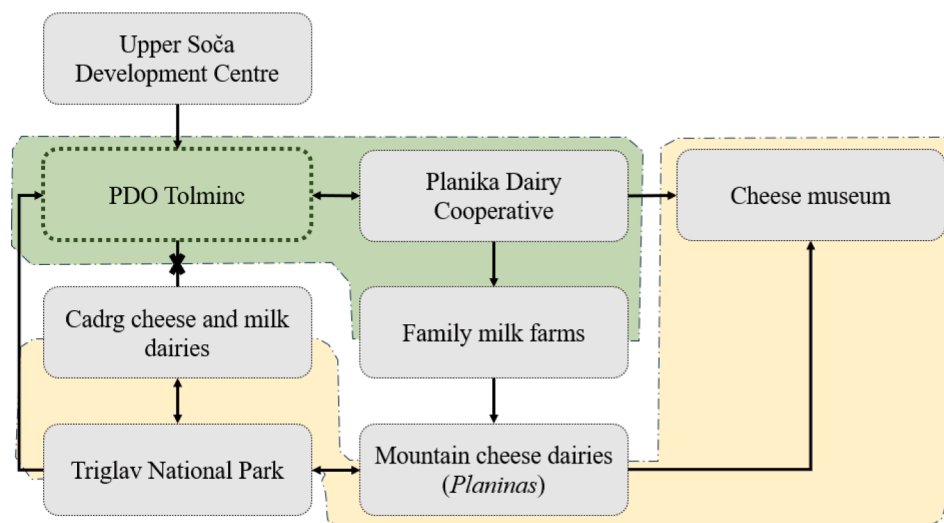


Fig. 2. Scheme identifying the key actors and their relationships in the production of cheese in the Tolmin case study area.

4.2. Cebreiro

In Cebreiro, two active dairies produce cheese under the GI label of the same name as their main activity — although a further two are also registered as producers. There are also, several small dairies in the region producing a similar fresh cheese without certification, usually as a complement to beef cattle farming. Fig. 3 shows the linkages between the region’s various actors according to the clustering of interviewees.

4.3. Establishment of the GI

The people of Cebreiro recall the region’s cheese as being a traditional homemade food, primarily for self-consumption, produced in very small quantities from their own surplus cow’s milk. Indeed, in the 1980s the cheese was on the verge of disappearing. At the end of that decade, a private family enterprise — the Castelo dairy — initiated the transformation of this traditional production into a professional activity, salvaging the region’s cheese-making. Pepe and Xoán report that Castelo were obliged to pasteurise the milk in order to comply with the prevailing health and safety regulations concerning commercialisation. This meant having to re-invent production methods in order to obtain a cheese of similar characteristics to those of the traditional raw-milk product. Shortly afterwards, Castelo and another dairy, Xan Busto, with the support of public rural development institutions, began to compile and document the history of the cheese, and applied for its recognition as a GI.

According to the interviewees, the GI has been vital for the survival of this cheese. On receiving GI recognition, the production of Cebreiro won support from the Galician Government as well as from a former association of Galician GIs, which provided help with marketing campaigns and access to exhibitions. Institutional support is reported to be pivotal in promoting the cheese outside its traditional production area and for reaching markets where it was previously unknown. Today the product is found throughout Galicia, and even in the main Spanish cities. Several of the interviewees spoke of the market ‘advantage’ that the GI represents for producers.

A public government cannot promote a private enterprise — for example, in a trade fair in Germany — but a GI, yes, a GI can. (Helena)

• Companies Engaged in the GI

Of the producers that applied for the GI, only Castelo (with just two employees plus family members) has maintained its production over the intervening years. According to our interviewees, Xan Busto withdrew due to the logistical difficulties (i.e. mountainous location) they faced to stay in business and because the owner found employment elsewhere. The number of producers in the GI has varied in this time between one and five, typically family firms with very few employees, if any.

The interviewees define production as very small, ‘minuscule’ —

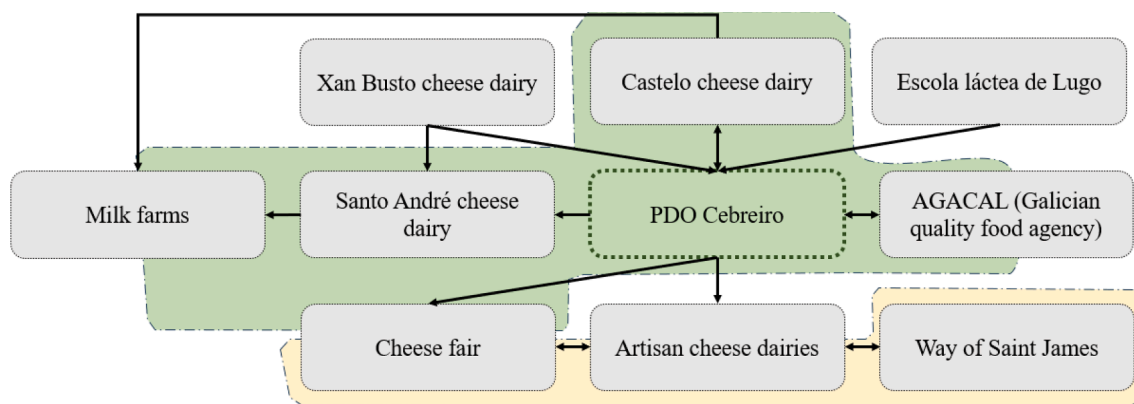


Fig. 3. Scheme identifying the key actors and their relationships in the production of cheese in the Cebreiro case study area. Green area corresponds to production conducted under the GI; the yellow represents the tourism sector.

‘ridiculous’ even — in comparison with other cheese productions — both in terms of the number of producers involved and of actual production volumes. In fact, none of the milk farms supplying milk to the GI depends solely on cheese-making to keep their business afloat. The informants identify the region’s depopulation and the mountain’s logistical difficulties faced as being the main obstacles to production and the opening of new dairies.

To address this situation, in the early 2000s, the GI producers agreed to amend the specification by expanding the area of production from the original mountain region into the lowlands where dairy farming was stronger, in an effort at guaranteeing milk supply. This geographical expansion also allowed these lowlands farms to start producing Cebreiro cheese. However, only one producer decided to do so, on the advice of a rural development agent. This farmer eventually abandoned its dairy farming activity to focus on the establishment of the Santo André cheese dairy. In this regard, one respondent, Pedro, sees the GI as an opportunity to access an exclusive market, with very few producers, where it is easier to start making cheese than in a regular, more crowded market. Indeed, the producers consider Cebreiro a niche market and describe how, in recent years, the product has undergone a remarkable expansion in the Spanish gourmet market and has even made a leap into the export market, where the matured Cebreiro cheese can command quite a high price. Given this growth, a GI producer laments:

It is a pity that there are clients who want cheese and cannot have it just because there is no one to produce it. (Pedro)

Likewise, several informants related to the GI pointed out, with regret, that a market is there for more producers to engage in the activity and satisfy consumer demand. But, at the same time, since it is a quality, niche market product, they also want to remain relatively small.

• *GI Management and Governance*

It emerged during the interviews that the two active GI dairies were seen as complementary: Castelo focused more on producing fresh Cebreiro and Santo André on its mature counterpart. The two firms do not consider themselves as being in competition with each other, their good relations being reflected in their agreement to charge the same price for their product. The interviewees concurred in considering the scarce number of producers of the GI a positive factor as it facilitates collaboration and ensures adequate levels of revenue. However, some referred to an earlier episode in which another GI dairy, now closed down, had tried to ‘take away’ customers by waging a price war.

The small scale is viewed by the GI regulatory board as non-problematic for decision-making. Nonetheless, the producers believe that, by being small, they have less power to lobby the public institutions to secure the necessary resources for advertising and promoting their cheese, for fighting against unfair competition, etc. The scale of the Cebreiro GI also raises concerns about the future viability of the regulatory board to manage itself:

Maybe, because it’s small it’s not worth it. This is a sentence you hear time and again [...]. [Some politicians] even told me that, if it were up to them, they wouldn’t give money from the Galician Government, and that the producers don’t need to have [a person] employed here [...]. They say: ‘What are you doing with just two producers?’ They only see problems, never think the opposite: you’re small, we’re going to support you and help wherever necessary so you get ahead [...]. Because they’re small, and because of the sacrifice they’re making, value them. Value them because the big ones don’t need anything anymore. (Marisa)

Some interviewees referred to a new legislative bill under discussion in Galicia that would bring the small-scale GI regulatory boards under the auspices of the already existing Galician Agency for Food Quality (better known by its Galician acronym, AGACAL), an institution set up by the Galician Government. This potential centralisation of functions,

which might well spell the end of the Cebreiro regulatory board, worries producers, who believe that the effective management of the GI depends on the direct participation of the producers themselves, that is, on people from the area who live there and know the product.

Finally, Cebreiro producers complain about a lack of support from certain local municipal governments. For example, it was reported that the municipal council of Pedrafita do Cebreiro — which is widely perceived to be the heartland of the cheese — does not like the fact that the Santo André dairy is allowed to commercialise Cebreiro, because it is located in an area that it does not consider as being the ‘real birthplace’ of the cheese. Thus, this producer is sometimes presented as a ‘intruder’. However, there are no such confrontations between the GI-Cebreiro producers themselves. Indeed, the interviewees reported the help given by the Xan Busto dairy (located in the perceived heartland) to the newcomer, Santo André, in setting up its cheese-making production.

• *Impact in the Region*

According to the interviewees, the GI, together with the religious/tourist route of *Camiño de Santiago*, has contributed to create an image or brand for the region. Some respondents mentioned, by way of example, the Cebreiro cheese fair, celebrated each April, and which has gained in importance over the years. The links established between the cheese and the town of Cebreiro have also favoured the emergence of new homemade cheese productions aside from that of the GI itself. These producers began producing cheese (under artisan license) as a complement to their primary activity of beef cattle farming activity and recognise that their cheese-making came about thanks to the GI:

[Obtaining the GI] was very good for the area because it helped to put it on the map, and although we don’t use the GI, people buy the cheese all the same because of the name of Cebreiro. Of course, they make an association. It was a way to make the area and the cheese of the area better known. (Mercedes)

However, some of the stakeholders within the GI scheme complain that these new producers exploit the label to sell their cheese — at similar prices — but without having to meet the costs of certification. They consider that these non-GI dairies engage in unfair competition, because they produce larger quantities than they are entitled to, legally. These cheesemakers however claim that as they employ more artisanal methods they cannot be considered as being in direct competition with the GI scheme. Indeed, they voluntarily use cultures other than those ruled mandatory for certification and, thus, make no effort to comply with regulated methods of production. Nonetheless, the homemade-cheese producers report further motivations to avoid joining the GI: more specifically, they have no plans to expand their activity and to become professional dairies with an industrial license; nor do they intend paying certification costs. These homemade producers, disengaged from the GI, are located in the main along the pilgrim route of the *Camiño de Santiago* and sell their cheese locally to the pilgrims/tourists.

According to various interviewees, the lack of incentives for professionalisation constitutes a missed opportunity to have more people in the area living directly from cheese production, and thus to expand the GI. In fact, only one artisan cheesemaker has professionalised their business, while another has joined the GI scheme but their production remains testimonial. As for the milk farmers that supply milk to the GI, although they receive higher prices from the cheese-makers, allegedly the volume of production dedicated to this destination does not provide the revenue they need to stay in business.

5. Small-Scale GIs: Rural development instruments or marketing tools for the Few?

This paper has undertaken an analysis of two small-scale GIs — that is, which comprise a very limited number of producers — within the broader theoretical context of the extant literature. In so doing, the aim

has been to determine whether GIs can be considered as instruments for rural development in their respective regions or whether they are in fact a spatial monopoly in the hands of one or more producers. The results that emerge highlight the contrasting situations in which the two GIs find themselves. In the first place, the case studies reveal the different motivations underpinning the establishment of the two GIs. On the one hand, Cebreiro started as an initiative to salvage traditional cheese production in the area and, as such, the GI was seen as a differentiation strategy for the valorisation of a local product — as recognised also by Tregear et al. (2007), Mancini (2013) and Vergamini et al. (2019). In short, Cebreiro provides an example of a GI that seeks to promote local development (Ray, 2000; Belletti and Marescotti, 2011). On the other hand, the Tolminc GI emerged from the struggle between two companies that sought ownership of the product place name. As such, the GI, in common with the first GI designations (Teil, 2017; Meloni and Swinnen, 2018), was established as a means of avoiding usurpation and of protecting and securing income for the Planika Dairy.

In the two case studies reported, the performance of the respective GI schemes is viewed differently: protectionist in the case of Tolminc, and developmentalist in the case of Cebreiro. Regulating the Tolminc allowed Planika to reap the benefits of a cheese that was already well-known in Slovenia — what Tregear et al. (2016) classify as an ‘established, mature system’; Cebreiro, in contrast, has achieved recognition beyond its local area thanks to the promotion made possible by the GI — what Tregear et al. (2016) classify as a ‘nascent, developing system’. The latter category is especially critical of small-scale productions with little marketing potential, doomed to failure if ineffectively promoted (Tregear et al., 2016).

In line with Benkahl et al. (2005) and Mancini (2013), who claim that the main benefit to be gained from exploiting a GI is in driving sales from local to extra-local markets, we have reported evidence that both the Tolminc and Cebreiro GIs have been effectively exploited by the producers using them to commercialise their product outside the local area, where most of their sales are indeed concentrated. This finding suggests that the endogenous development thesis of GI schemes (Woods, 2010; Belletti and Marescotti, 2011) does not entirely hold on its own. Although they may be locally driven, GIs are also dependent on external factors (including, that is, being recognised in non-local markets) if they seek to be truly effective (Lamarque and Lambin, 2015; Quiñones-Ruiz et al., 2020).

In short, both GIs evidence a clear market orientation in their construction. Beyond their apparent economic effects, the Tolminc and Cebreiro schemes seem to indicate that GIs — even when small in scale — are a useful instrument for the branding of their regions (cf. Forney and Häberli, 2016; McMorran et al., 2015). For example, the institutionalisation of the link with the Cebreiro region has served to boost the local cheese fair, while the Tolminc GI has been exploited in promoting the region’s tourism. Moreover, in the case of Cebreiro, the reputation of the GI-certified product has allowed artisan dairies disengaged from the scheme to command similar prices for their product to those charged by the GI dairies. Our findings here are in line with claims made by Clark and Martínez (2016) to the effect that the added-value of certified products — in this instance fair-trade and other private certifications — can spill-over onto non-certified producers located in the same region. Our study takes this argument further by demonstrating its validity for GI labels too.

Beyond their strictly economic dimension, the two GI schemes studied here do not, according to our results, appear to have any other significant impacts in their respective regions. The Cebreiro GI is not associated with the generation of any substantial positive cultural or environmental externalities. However, in the Tolminc area, it might be argued that the traditional cheese producers contribute to preserving the mountain landscape and to boosting the region’s tourism — an effect that has been described by Pachoud et al. (2020), McMorran et al. (2015) and others. It might well be that the preservation of these Slovenian pastures is attributable to the fact that the GI remunerates the

milk producers that supply the Planika Dairy. Yet, our study fails to identify a causal relationship here and, indeed, other factors, including direct payments from the EU to keep the pasture productive (Bertoni et al., 2020), could also be influential. Thus, the multifunctionality of GIs has not been demonstrated in our research, in contrast with Sylvander et al. (2011) and Belletti and Marescotti’s (2011, 2015) inferences in this regard.

Interestingly, many scholars put rural development on an equal footing with economic development when assessing the impact of GI schemes, taking into consideration the effects both on the local economy of specific GIs (e.g., De Roest and Menghi, 2000; Bowen, 2011) and on a range of aspects looked at from the wider perspective of value-added (Cei et al., 2021; Crescenzi et al., 2022). If we assume this equivalence of concepts, then we can infer that the two GIs studied here have contributed to rural development. However, if rural development is considered in relation to what are deemed to be the three fundamental pillars of sustainability (Blewitt, 2008; Potter et al., 2008), our research shows that the contribution of GIs to social and environmental gains is debatable. Indeed, the European Commission (2021) has already acknowledged that the environmental dimension of GIs cannot be taken for granted, and for this reason it is seeking to incorporate specific environmental requirements within its GI policy as part of its wider Green Deal framework (European Commission, 2020).

Ultimately, however, it is the economic dimension that is determinative as to whether a GI scheme can be exclusionary for actors inside a designated area or not. In the cases of both Cebreiro and Tolminc, homemade/traditional producers operating outside the scheme show little interest in forming part of the respective GIs because they are able to sell their cheese locally for a similar price and are loath to meet the costs for obtaining GI certification. This tendency towards voluntary exclusion is consistent with descriptions in Pachoud et al. (2019), among others, who highlight the additional burden of having to invest to meet GI requisites, and with Belletti et al. (2015), who stress the importance of perceived profitability when producers are deciding whether or not to engage in a GI scheme. Consequently, our case studies point to what might be considered a loophole as far as small-scale GIs operate: the scant number of producers involved in them is attributable, somewhat ironically, to the fact that the cheese-makers that operate outside them, but which are located in the same region, benefit from the GI designation without actually forming part of it; thus, they have few incentives for joining the scheme. Closing this loophole represents a fairly major challenge for the sustainability of these small-scale GIs.

In the case of Tolminc, however, we have detected other motives as to why some producers have not joined the GI scheme. The Planika Dairy Cooperative is the dominant player in the cheese-production sector in the Tolminc area, controlling the supply chain and promoting their product throughout Slovenia. For this reason, the region’s other producers feel powerless to compete against this hegemony. Both Tregear et al. (2016) and De Rosa et al. (2017) warn of the capacity of big companies to seize GIs. Their warnings acquire even greater relevance when a single enterprise concentrates practically all the power and benefits of the GI; the case of Planika, whose position of advantage rings of spatial monopoly (Goodman, 2004). Yet, be that as it may, Planika’s engagement with the GI can also be considered a successful application of this instrument: first, because GI protection impedes unfair competition that may have displaced Planika production in favour of that of dairies from outside the area, and, second, because by insisting that supplies of milk and fodder be local, they guarantee the continuity of the region’s farming.

The differences between the two case studies confirm that monopolistic/non-monopolistic assessments of these GIs ultimately depend on their governance (Sonnino, 2007; Tregear et al., 2007). In line with the governance models proposed by Sylvander et al. (2004), Cebreiro roughly represents a case of sectoral governance, focused on cheese-makers, yet lacking strong ties with local institutions, milk farmers and other activities in the area; conversely, Tolminc exemplifies

a case of corporate governance, with much decision-making power vested in the manager/director of the Planika cooperative.

In the Slovenian case, the absence of any GI management structure or body has meant that the GI fails to accommodate the needs of many of the region's producers, who, as a result, opt not to engage. In this regard, [DuPuis and Goodman \(2005\)](#) and [Belletti and Marescotti \(2011\)](#), among others, highlight the importance of the adequate representativeness of stakeholders' interests in ensuring an equitable distribution of the benefits of a GI. In the Spanish case, in contrast, the requirement to appoint a GI management body — as in France ([Marie-Vivien, 2010](#)) — is a guarantee of the GI's legitimacy ([Sylvander et al., 2011](#); [Marie-Vivien et al., 2019](#)).

Our study also highlights how, although based on a common EU framework, substantial differences exist between GIs from one member state to another in this respect. While such a disparity of models has been identified in earlier comparative studies of GIs (e.g., [Fernández-Zarza et al., 2019](#); [Penker et al., 2022](#)), the absence of research focusing on GIs operating without producer organisations is surprising, given the relevance conceded to governance structures of this kind in the success or failure of GIs ([Barjolle et al., 2017](#); [Quiñones-Ruiz et al., 2017](#)).

Finally, one aspect that clearly emerges from the case studies reported here, and one that is reflected in ongoing debates at the EU level ([European Commission, 2021](#)), is whether the scale of these GIs justifies their existence in terms of receiving support from public institutions. The scant number of producers in Cebreiro impacts the scheme's capacity to organise promotional campaigns and other activities. Moreover, its management structure is not, by itself, viable and requires external support, which is in contradiction with current legislative trends aimed at making them self-sustainable ([Marie-Vivien, 2010](#)). The situation is somewhat paradoxical, given that the rationale on which these instruments is based, ultimately, depends on the ability of their governance structures to be effective ([Quiñones-Ruiz et al., 2016](#); [Vandecastelaere et al., 2020](#)). The Slovenian case illustrates that, in the absence of these governance structures, the GI operates almost exclusively as a marketing brand, which benefits a particular enterprise, but does not foster collective action and social innovation as [Sanz and Macías \(2005\)](#) and [Quiñones-Ruiz et al. \(2020\)](#) stress.

6. Conclusions and policy recommendations

Despite a very limited number of producers, we have shown that even the smallest GIs can have a significant impact on rural areas. Small-scale GIs effectively confer a market advantage on their registered producers, providing them with an opportunity to maintain their agricultural production, while at the same time keeping their productions localised. Moreover, our study highlights how such GIs contribute to the branding of regions. In short, small-scale GIs should not be dismissed because of their size. Indeed, their contribution to rural development might even match that of their larger counterparts, especially in those areas that lag behind, as is the case of many of Europe's mountain regions. We have demonstrated that size does not foreshadow the governance dynamics of a GI nor the impact it might have on the region in which it is embedded.

Here, however, we have found evidence that the existence of these small-scale GIs is sometimes questioned precisely because of their limited size. The debate seems to hinge on the political considerations in play. If one of the justifications for the creation of a GI is to promote rural development, then they should be clearly supported even when only a few producers are involved in the scheme. The primary problem can be identified as the fact that the management bodies of small-scale GIs, such as Cebreiro, may not, by themselves, be economically sustainable as required by prevailing legislation in Spain and France. It is our contention, however, that they should be supported as long as there are professional producers capable of maintaining a localised agricultural production. In this case, they could be supported either by the public institutions or by their entering into coalitions with larger GIs.

Finally, this study is not without its limitations. In terms of methodology, we have opted to identify small-scale GIs in terms of the number of producers engaged in them. This has proved useful when exploring matters related to GI governance, inclusiveness and some of a GI's wider effects on a region. However, further research could usefully focus on the alleged effects of cheese GIs on milk farmers in particular, as well as on the role played by cooperatives/associations in redistributing the benefits generated by GIs.

To balance the discussion as to whether GIs can act as spatial monopolies or not, we would also need to consider their respective production volumes and revenues. Clearly, it is not the same to have two small cheese-dairies working in an area with little entrepreneurship than one big enterprise dominating the market and benefiting from the GI. In this sense, a complementary quantitative analysis of production volumes could be useful in assessing the scale of production that would make a GI worthwhile for a small producer and in determining the desirability of supporting small GIs as part of a rural development strategy. The study we report here presents some evidence to confirm the latter, but more research is clearly needed.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Rubén Boga: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Valerià Paül:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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