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Policy Brief

DINARIC ALPS | Sjenica lamb PDO

Photo credit: Dragan Bosnić, Touristic Organisation of Sjenica

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Dinaric Alps: Sjenica Lamb PDO

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Summary

Sjenica sheep, an autochthonous breed of the Sjenica/Pester plateau, are adapted to the harsh climate conditions of the region. They are characterised by quality meat, good milk yields and fine wool. Production of Sjenica Lamb Meat Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) is one of the key value chains (VCs). It is interconnected with other high-quality product VCs – Sjenica Cheese PDO and Stelja PDO (the latter a preserved meat).

The Sjenica Lamb VC is deeply rooted in the tradition of the region, due to different social, economic, and natural aspects. The multi-cultural and multi-national community of Sjenica (ethnic Muslim/Bosniaks and Orthodox Serbs/Montenegrins) depend on agriculture (around 55%), namely from sheep and cattle breeding. Sheep are grazed on natural pastures, using traditional seasonal "katun" grazing (herds in the mountains, with family members as shepherds). Parts of the Pester plateau where sheep are grazed belong to the Ramsar protected area.

As it is already a very important economic activity, production of Sjenica Lamb has the potential to be the driver to put Sjenica on the international map of high-quality products. Still, many aspects bring vulnerability to this production – from endangered natural resources, to high levels of migration and a delicate political situation, and centralised national policies that are not adequate for this specific region.

Know more about the Dinaric Mountains Reference Region, its selected value chain and the regional multi-actor platform (MAP), here.

Key policy messages

- Sjenica Lamb Meat (PDO) has the best potential for regional development.
- Co-creating policies and better living conditions with and for young people of the region is crucial for its survival.
- Reaching sustainability of natural resources while developing the Sjenica Lamb value chain should be a long-term goal.
- Relevant actors from the local and regional level must be involved in co-development of important policies at national level, taking in consideration the specificity of the Sjenica and Pester plateau area.

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1. The Mountain Reference Region (MRR)

The Mountain Reference Region (MRR) of Dinaric Alps (Western Serbia) belongs to the Dinarides (Dinaric Alps), a great mountain range of south-eastern Europe, with an area of approximately 100 000 km^2 naturally connecting eight countries: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo*, Albania and North Macedonia. The area of the MRR presented here (Sumadija and Western Serbia) belongs to Western Serbia, more precisely to the area from the river of Drina on the west to the West Morava on the south, bordering with Montenegro, Kosovo* and North Macedonia. The area includes some of the most beautiful and wild mountains in Serbia, like Tara, Zlatar and Golija, as well as highland areas like the Sjenica and Pester plateau (LAU area). Numerous karst relief forms characterise these areas, representing habitat for diverse flora and fauna, out of which many are endangered and protected species.

There are several natural protected areas in the MRR, including Special Nature Reserve Pestersko polje (plateau), the largest and highest karst field of the Balkan Peninsula. This site was included in a Ramsar site in 2006. The site originated as a lake, which vanished due to the karst erosion. This process left peat bogs and small flooded areas exposed, creating a diverse landscape. Peatlands are a rare and endangered habitat in Serbia, and the site features several of them, including the biggest one in the country.

Sjenica/Pester Plateau is a multi-cultural and multi-national area, comprised of Serbian orthodox and Muslim Bosniaks. Though the area is rural and underdeveloped comparing to the rest of the country, the population is young and there is a positive natural increase. Families are multi-generational, often with several families of different generation living in the same household (family cooperative communities). Prevailing economic activity is agriculture, accenting by livestock production (cattle and sheep).

Natural environment, nomadic/free range livestock systems and grazing on natural pastures with many medical herbs give high-quality meat and milk. There are several PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) products from the area, including the Sjenica Lamb Meat, which is the PDO selected as the value chain (VC) to be studied.

The area is known for its extreme winter temperatures (down to -40°C), while summers are with pleasant temperatures. In the last few years, the area has become more popular as a tourist destination, especially for nature-based tourism, hiking, cycling, etc.

Lack of infrastructure (especially absence of regional waste management sites), uncontrolled exploitation of peat, uncontrolled illegal construction, and water supply problems are becoming significant threats to high natural value areas.

2. Tradition and quality in search for global recognition

Sjenica Lamb is a PDO (fresh lamb meat) coming from Sjenica sheep, a local autochthonous breed. This sheep is known at local, regional and international markets for its high-quality meat. In addition to the quality meat, these sheep give good quality milk that is mostly processed into white sheep cheese in brine (Sjenica Cheese PDO). The third product protected as a PDO is Sjenica Stelja (dried sheep meat / specific as the whole animal is dried), specific for a cross border region too (Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina). Wool is also of a good quality, usually only used by local women making handcrafts and knitting. There were attempts to develop markets for wool from Sjenica and Pester, but this was not very successful. Sjenica sheep are highly resilient to the harsh weather conditions of the Sjenica and Pester plateau.

Livestock husbandry is the main agricultural activity in the area of Pester plateau. In 2020 there were about 30 000 sheep in Sjenica municipality, but this number is declining. It varies from year to year, depending on the prices and sources/supply of food (hay and fodder for winter). Sheep farms are owned by farmers and registered as agriculture households. There are a couple of meat processing units (companies) and small dairies in the area of Pester plateau and Sjenica.

Pester plateau is rich in natural pastures, including different medical herbs, where sheep are grazed. This results in high-quality sheep meat, as well as sheep milk. Sjenica Lamb Meat PDO production is the main VC. Male sheep only are sold for meat, mostly as live animals to intermediaries or directly to local slaughterhouses. Female sheep are kept for breeding, as well as for milk production. The area's three PDO products – Sjenica Lamb Meat, Sjenica Stelja (dried deboned sheep) and Sjenica Sheep Cheese – originate from the same sheep farms. These are interlinked and should therefore be analysed as interconnected value chains.

Due to the prevailing livestock production, cattle breeding, beef meat production and processing of mixed cheese (cow and sheep mixed cheese) can also be closely interconnected with the Sjenica sheep value chains. There are a few processing companies and slaughterhouses in the area with capacities not big enough to buy and process all sheep. Intermediaries still make an important link to the markets (domestic and international), leaving livestock farmers in a very vulnerable position, as they are fully dependent on them.

On-farm processing is traditional. Products are mostly sold on local and regional markets (South Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro), while there is growing interest for exports that used to be very prominent. There are new policies on the national level that can make it more possible for small households to register their processing units and be active as market players. Due to local habits and demand, processing companies have Halal certification, creating an additional advantage by aiming at markets and customers that request this standard (Turkey, Middle East, UAE, etc.). A small share of fresh meat is sold through registered processing establishments, mostly to large retail chains and butcher shops.

3. Value chain contribution to sustainability and resilience of the Mountain Reference Region (MRR): barriers and opportunities

Tradition is strongly rooted in all elements of the Sjenica sheep VC organisation and production. Due to the climatic conditions, sheep livestock production is a perfect match to maximise economic opportunities, providing the good governance systems work towards its full sustainability and maintain the production. The images of vast natural and pristine pastures, high-quality meat and dairy products produced there, are transformed into market reputation and later protected designations of origin. These factors have been driving demand. However, many elements are necessary to sustain such production and reduce risks and vulnerabilities.

Sjenica sheep production depends on a supply of green feed in the short summer season. Robust and less demanding, this sheep is also a good choice for the fragile but rich pastures and meadows, and its management is crucial to secure enough supplies of food. Also, water management is one of the key elements for maintaining production, while observing changes in precipitation and water supply for the flock. Outmigration and maintaining social and family structures that enable year-round production, either through large family cooperatives or other ways of sustaining the labour force, represent a key pillar. The dairy production is part of the gender job division and female labour involvement is in decline. Strong dependence on middleman and lack of access to end markets, leave farmers with little margin, and value chain organisation exposes them to market risks. There is little formalisation and cooperation established, so that the external actors continue to have the upper hand.

Rural infrastructure needs improvement to improve living conditions in the summer farms (katun), where the majority of production is done, and to enable improvement of food safety standards and regimes.

The lack of diversification within livestock production, and little linkage with rural tourism, and outdoor activities, leave these opportunities still to be explored.

4. Policy relevant considerations

Further innovation and investments along the value chain are needed to capture added value in the region. The possibilities for labelling meat and milk products by origin or quality are not used, as most products are finalised elsewhere, and there is small capacity in local facilities and a lack of knowledge on such opportunities. The effort to formalise production to be able to differentiate and access other markets, such as retail and HoReCa, and to inform on the properties of products, is needed.

Overall, local development measures that support infrastructure and production investment need improvement. These should be coupled with spatial planning and usage that would further recognise such production as valuable, despite its extensiveness, and make room for both

nature and agriculture, but also acknowledge vulnerabilities to the management and extensive use of resources and climate change.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

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