MOVING
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Policy Brief

DINARIC ALPS | Sjenica lamb PDO – Pester plateau

Photo credit: Dragan Bosnić, Touristic Organisation of Sjenica

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MOUNTAIN VALORISATION THROUGH INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND GREEN GROWTH

Sjenica lamb PDO, Dinaric Alps, Sjenica – Pester plateau

Dragana Tar, Tamara Zivadinovic (Mena Group)

Summary

Sjenica sheep, autochthonous breed of Sjenica/Pester plateau is well adopted breed for harsh climate conditions of the region. It is characterized by quality meat, good milk yields and fine wool. Production of Sjenica lamb meat (PDO) is traditional, and it is one of the key VCs, interconnected with other high quality product VCs – Sjenica cheese and stelja, both PDOs. Sjenica lamb VC is deeply rooted in the tradition of the region, due to different social, economic and natural aspects. As already being very important economic activity, production of Sjenica lamb has a potential to be the driver and bring Sjenica to the international map of high-quality products. Still, many aspects bring vulnerability to this production – from endangered natural resources to high migrations and delicate political situation, and centralized national policies, not adequate for this specific region.

Figure 1: Picture of Sjenica/Pester landscape with natural pastures and sheep flock

Key Policy Messages

- ☞ Sjenica lamb meat (PDO) and the interconnected products, are the main 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 should be a long-term goal
- ☞ Relevant actors from the local and regional level to be involved in co-development of important policies that can withstand "mountain proofing" of these regulations.

1. *Harsh climate and rich natural resources shape the quality and reputation of Sjenica lamb PDO*

The Pester plateau/ Sjenica, are well known for its natural beauty, tasty food and harsh living conditions. Highland of Pester is the largest and the highest karst field in the Balkans, and the life is marked by isolation, natural pressures, (temperature extremes from -35 to 40°C), but also cultural and national diversity of Muslim/Orthodox and Bosniak/Serbian communities, which make the unique blend of features. Even the area is rural and underdeveloped, its population is young comparing to the rest of the country. Families are multi-generational and prevailing economic activity is agriculture, sheep and cattle production.

Sjenica lamb is a PDO -fresh lamb meat from **Sjenica sheep**, a local autochthonous breed, its quality properties are rooted in transhumance pastoralist practices that take

the best of natural environmental conditions, by nomadic/free range livestock systems, grazing on natural pastures with many high biodiversity. Three PDO products are protected from the area, aside from Sjenica lamb PDO, also Sjenica sheep cheese PDO, and Sjenica stelja PDO (dried sheep meat).

In the last couple of years, the area became more popular as a touristic 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 threat to this area of a high natural value.

2. Value chain contribution to resilience and sustainability

Sjenica sheep high resilience to the harsh weather conditions, as well as suited natural resources, resulted in livestock husbandry still remaining the main agricultural activity in the area.

The overall family and community dynamics was set to sustain livestock husbandry. Sheep farms, sometimes organised in the family cooperatives, are the main units of production, registered as agriculture households. There are a few meat processing companies, and small dairies in the area of Pester plateau and Sjenica. On-farm processing is traditional and the level of know how is high. Products are mostly sold on local and regional markets (South Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro), while there is a rising interest for export that used to be very prominent. Lack of registered processing facilities and undeveloped market information, product development and market presence, give leverage to intermediaries and often leave farmers in a very vulnerable and passive position.

Pester plateau is rich in natural pastures with different specific and medical herbs, where sheep graze. This and the properties of autochthonous breed, results in high quality sheep meat and milk, as well as meat and dairy products.

The three PDO products are interconnected and part of the same production system. However, the VC is insufficiently integrated and communication throughout different levels is weak, as well as cooperation and integrated management.

The main value and logic of the local community and production system is resilience – surviving the hardships to sustain the production and expanding the flock. There have been improvements that boost efficiency of the production (better fodder and stables), but the extensive nature of production, that is not dependent on externalities, enables sustainable agriculture in tune with natural dynamics. The overall logic is resilience includes:

- activation of external solidarity mechanisms
- adaptation of agricultural practices to reduce pressures of pasture use and water deficiency.
- push for the development of the PDO effects through connections and synergies with other value chains in the same region.

3. Policy experiences

Along with the long term declining trend of number of Sjenica sheep, there are year to

year fluctuations, depending mostly on the prices/market demand and sources/supply of food (hay and fodder for winter). To provide the boost for the livestock sector, and to reverse the impacts of many risks, the national agricultural policy and rural development measures have been established. These measures are providing direct payments for the high-quality breeding sheep, granted for the animals with registered pedigree, (min 30 and maximum 150 heads) as well as fattening lamb. In only a few last years, the number of sheep doubled, as a response of direct payments per head (75 eur per high quality sheep and 25 eur per fattening lamb).

These measures resulted in the quick increase of the sheep number, as noted by the agricultural census of 2023, however, to ensure sustainable trend, this has to be coupled by other structural improvements.

The collective intellectual property rights in the form of geographical indications/products of origin (GI/PDO and PGI), coupled with food quality policy have been established by relevant institutions, and is still in ongoing reform. This regulatory frame should suit to support better labelling and quality communication of high reputation food products and its intrinsic quality properties. Though there are three products with protected names of origin (Sjenica lamb, Sjenica cheese and Sjenica stelja- dried meat), none of them are certified and controlled and there are significant gaps in quality governance. This is related to the weak collective action and lack of the capacity for value chain coordination and integrative action.

There have been little activities and policy interventions aimed at organisational development and cohesion of VC actors. The flexibility food safety rules have been established for meat and dairy processing on the farm and in small establishments, but due to lack of information and investment support the effects are insufficient. This leaves Sjenica farmers and overall VC in the inferior role of supply of raw materials (mostly live animals) or, due to lack of the registration, out of the formalised market channels to valorise its premium products.

Farmer organisations that have been formed within the donor projects are not showing sustainability and lack continuous advisory and mentorship support. Overall knowledge transfer facilities and infrastructure (particularly the Center for the agriculture and rural development) have also not received committed local support and are unable to serve the farmers community.

Little or none diversification efforts and ideas were strategically identified to link livestock production, nature and rural tourism and outdoor activities, with nature and cultural resources of pastoralist lifestyle. These assets are not actively used for territorial branding and attracting visitors.

4. *Recommendation for future policies*

The overall awareness and the attention to the mountain regions needs to be adopted by the policy and research framework.

Data is important - The interest for the research and data collection needs to be established, to illustrate and justify the policy proposals and development scenarios. Data collection on all aspects of the mountain socio economic indicators, value chain

organisation should be integrated in wider research frame, joint with the specialised data collection.

Knowledge, skill building and training programs need to be continuous and structural, supporting established centres /institutions, which is the key for sustainability. Along with production and resource management, entrepreneurial capacities and mindset need to be nurtured through continuous learning and vocational trainings.

Interventions that support collective action can raise engagement – This includes development of organisational and business models that reflect the needs of mountain areas, support to leadership and facilitation in initiatives such sa machinery investments based on collaboration, product certification and internal control, market information, strengthening group rules, management and collective dynamics. These models also should rely to wider mechanisms for exchanging ideas, solutions and good examples (through citizen forums, rural development, LEADER initiatives, or similar networks)

Facilitate improved access to investment support to optimize production and resolve lack of manual labour in the future. Local authorities can improve access to rural development investment mechanisms by providing technical assistance, while simplified procedures for mountain areas can be considered by national and donor programs.

Improved space planning and usage that would further recognize such production as valuable despite its extensiveness and keep the space to the nature and agriculture, but also acknowledge vulnerabilities to the management and extensive use of resources and climate change,

Sustainable land use practices to promote climate change adaptation and focus on improved feed supply, improve soil health, and enhance biodiversity is key for addressing climate change effects. Donors and national level need to build awareness of the fragility of mountain ecosystems and ecopastoral practices.

Support establishing market mechanisms that can give value to quality, biodiversity, tradition and other stakes of mountain areas etc. Foster social innovation and linkages with those who can open new marketing channels and direct communication to public.

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Authors

Tamara Zivadinovic
Mena Group,
tamara.zivadinovic@gmail.com

Dragana Tar
Mena Group
dragana.tar@seedev.org