



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Using geographical indications to improve sustainability



**Lessons
learned** | from 15 years of FAO work on
geographical indications





Key messages

- Geographical indications (GIs) can represent an important lever to strengthen local sustainability and sustainable food systems by combining processes at the territorial level. Sustainability is understood as the combination of three pillars: economic, environmental and social sustainability. GI systems act as catalysts for sustainability in the long run, as they ensure the continuous use of traditional production, processing and marketing practices and know-how.
- GIs are collective intellectual property rights in the hands of GI producers (i.e. farmers and processors involved in the production of GI products). As demonstrated by multiple projects implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the way producers and other actors in the value chain manage GIs is crucial to their contribution to the provision of public goods and sustainability.
- There are promising areas where GIs can boost sustainability, including nutrition, preservation of the environment, and social benefits for vulnerable categories. In all these areas, local stakeholders play a fundamental role in the identification of local resources and issues to address, and in the guaranteeing of the sustainability of GI systems. There is a need to gather evidence and formulate best practices regarding the contribution of GIs to sustainability.
- Policy and regulatory frameworks should ensure the continuity of GI schemes over time. This continuity can contribute to environmental preservation and social responsibility in the long term. More specifically, it is important to encourage local GI communities to engage in long-term sustainability pathways through territorial strategies and by formulating performant GI specifications, as these are key to the contribution of GIs to sustainability. GI registration procedures should ensure that GI systems are adequately prepared and revised as needed, in line with local sustainability issues.

A geographical indication (GI)

is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin. A GI is an intellectual property right that can directly benefit a group of producers, and particularly smallholders. GIs build on specifications that demonstrate the link between a product's origin and its qualities by defining the agricultural and processing practices that produce those specific qualities (for example the variety, the soil or climate conditions, the traditional knowledge applied at each stage, specific materials used, etc.).



Background: the use of geographical indications as a lever for sustainability

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development makes an ambitious and crucial call for the transformation of agrifood systems. The United Nations Food Systems Summit of 2021 recognized the importance of territorial approaches to achieve this transformation. One of these approaches is the development and application of GIs. As highlighted in previous publications (FAO, 2009; FAO and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2018), GI processes can enhance sustainability, understood as the combination of three pillars (economic, environmental and social sustainability). In particular, GI systems can increase incomes for all actors in local value chains, including small-scale producers (farmers and processors), thus improving their livelihoods and boosting their resilience. In addition, increased incomes allow GI producers to invest in GI systems to strengthen their performances in the three pillars.
- GI systems generate positive environmental externalities by encouraging the adoption and certification of practices that preserve natural resources and biodiversity.
- GI systems strengthen local governance in through GI organizations, support inclusiveness and promote male and female entrepreneurship in local tourism sectors. Thus, they foster social fairness, gender equity and the preservation of local traditions.





The development and implementation of GIs bolster the restoration, preservation and promotion of the cultural identity, specific knowledge and natural resources linked to a particular territory. Thus, GIs are an instrument that GI producers and their communities can exploit to create an endogenous sustainability pathway towards the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. GI processes are often supported by policy and regulatory frameworks that ensure the continuity of GI schemes over time, and thus their long-term contribution to economic development and environmental and social responsibility.

Despite this potential, the awareness of public and private stakeholders as to the potential and modalities of GI systems to improve sustainability in their territories remains generally insufficient. It is therefore crucial to raise awareness and provide practical tools and recommendations to amplify the contribution of GI systems to sustainability, in line with local issues.



Learning from experience: the importance of endogenous and inclusive GI processes

Practices and knowledge shared with researchers, governments and stakeholders along value chains, as well as field experiences gained in over 30 projects (and a similar number of countries) since the launch of FAO's work on GIs in 2007,¹ have taught a number of important lessons regarding the use of GIs as a tool for sustainability. Based on these lessons, tailored best practices can be formulated, and important topics for further investigation can be identified.

Best practices for GI producers

At country level, FAO technical assistance places a strong emphasis on **empowering producers and strengthening fair value chains**.² **Participatory processes** are crucial to build trust among value chain stakeholders and encourage collective action, and place the local community at the core of the development of GIs. These participatory processes allow for the inclusion of all value chain stakeholders, and in particular the more vulnerable categories – which often are the ones with the specific traditional knowledge that is at the

¹ For more information on FAO's work on GIs, see fao.org/geographical-indications.

² The FAO methodology of the origin-linked virtuous circle provides practical guidelines on how to contribute to sustainable development through the GI process along different stages – identification, qualification, remuneration and reproduction. It highlights the importance of assessing impacts and adjusting GI systems to maximize positive contributions to the three dimensions of sustainability, by learning from doing and evolving in a context of changes (internal or external to the system).

heart of the GI. In addition, participatory processes have a great potential to improve sustainability, as they help raise awareness and encourage consensus building.

Participatory processes are the foundation of GI sustainability, and particularly of social and economic development. All stakeholders are invited to take part in the discussions and decision-making processes. Participatory processes facilitate the creation of strong GI organizations that represent all stakeholders involved in the GI value chain and allow them to make decisions regarding their production and processing systems and territory. The participatory approach and empowerment are conducive to creative thinking and problem-solving, which also helps actors confront other collective problems such as climate change, rural exodus, etc.

The GI sustainability strategy developed by FAO and oriGIn

Applying FAO's approach to sustainability, which recognizes sustainability as a pathway as opposed to a state, FAO and oriGIn, the Organization for an International Geographical Indications Network, have developed a sustainability strategy for

GIs, to help producers and their organizations engage in a sustainability pathway. Local community engagement in a sustainability pathway is aimed at raising awareness and building the capacities of GI producers to understand the issues and benefits and improve their

own GI systems. In order to develop a tailored and effective strategy, the issues specific to the territory must be identified, and priorities selected. FAO and oriGIn have developed tools to support these processes, including specific indicators that can easily be used locally.

Local stakeholders, and particularly GI producers, therefore have a critical role to play in the identification of the local resources involved in their GI (production) systems and the guaranteeing of its sustainability. GI stakeholders can consider two modalities to improve sustainability in their GI participatory processes:

- ↳ **Consider sustainability in the GI specifications**, bearing in mind that the sustainability-improving practices should be in line with the preservation of the product-specific quality or reputation. For example, the GI specifications could include a typical landscape associated with the GI production, or define the role of smallholders or women producers, giving them a position with greater decision-making power in the value chain. GI specifications could also require the use of sustainable production practices (such as organic or agroecological production methods), in line with traditions. Importantly, any positive contributions to the environment greatly depend on the number and type/level of requirements adopted in the GI specifications regarding the preservation of the local resources involved in the GI production.
- ↳ **Collectively define a territorial strategy for sustainability**: the GI organization should build strong networks with other local stakeholders, partners and experts, including public authorities. Participative processes that engage local stakeholders for the future of their territory boost stakeholders' sense of ownership and promote a shared vision of sustainability that encompasses different economic sectors and areas of life in a territory.



GIs and sustainability: topics for further research

GI systems deliver some specific contributions to sustainable food systems that deserve to be highlighted. The potential of **GI systems to act as a catalyst for better nutrition and health** is emerging in the literature: GI systems can promote the conservation of species with a better nutritional profile (e.g. species collected in the wild), and many GI foods (especially fruits and vegetables) contain more antioxidants – as well as flavour – than their non-GI versions. Another mechanism is the preservation of traditional production and processing methods that better preserve or even enrich the nutritional status of foods. This is the case, for example, for fermented GI products (cheese, tea, tofu, etc.), animal products where traditional pastoralist practices guarantee a higher nutritional profile of the final product, or fruits and vegetables where traditional harvesting methods better preserve nutritional qualities (and taste).

The **contribution of GI processes to biodiversity** is another key topic that deserves more attention from both practitioners and policymakers. There are many examples of GI production systems and products that have a direct positive impact on both agricultural and wild biodiversity, through production practices and ecosystem management. These examples include GI products linked to indigenous varieties (preserved through the GI specifications) or wild varieties (herbs, fruits, mushrooms, etc.), products based on extensive pasturing (dairy and meat products) or products that contribute to the preservation of the wild ecosystem (honey).

GI systems can also act as a catalyst towards the **inclusion of vulnerable categories and gender equality**. Smallholders and women often play a pivotal role in production and processing, bringing their unique knowledge. GI development can act locally as a strategic

driving force towards gender balance, smallholder and women entrepreneurship and empowerment. In many cases, the reputation of the GI product enhances the attractiveness of the territory for tourism and gastronomy, creating new jobs and promoting investments. This also offers opportunities for newcomers and younger generations.

The **intimate links between GI systems, local gastronomy and rural tourism** are important and merit further documentation. The particular connections and synergies between GI reputation and territorial branding have been observed in all countries. They generate public and private interest in developing local tourism and offer possibilities for other sectors of the territory to reap economic, social and environmental sustainability benefits.

In some countries, GI specifications delimit specific GI land areas, which are recognized as part of the cultural heritage. This approach contributes to **land protection**, as the land historically used for GI production cannot lose its agricultural production status. It is an interesting mechanism to protect land from competing uses or safeguard communities' land rights (especially in a context of climate change and land-grabbing) and merits further investigation.

These different topics should be better integrated in the development and management of GI systems, particularly during the definition stage of GI specifications, which represent a powerful instrument to enforce place-based measures. More evidence regarding these potential benefits of GI systems would help raise awareness among public authorities, practitioners, value chain actors and donors and solicit supportive actions.



Policy implications

To promote the provision and preservation of public goods through GI processes, sound policy and legal frameworks and specific policy support are key.

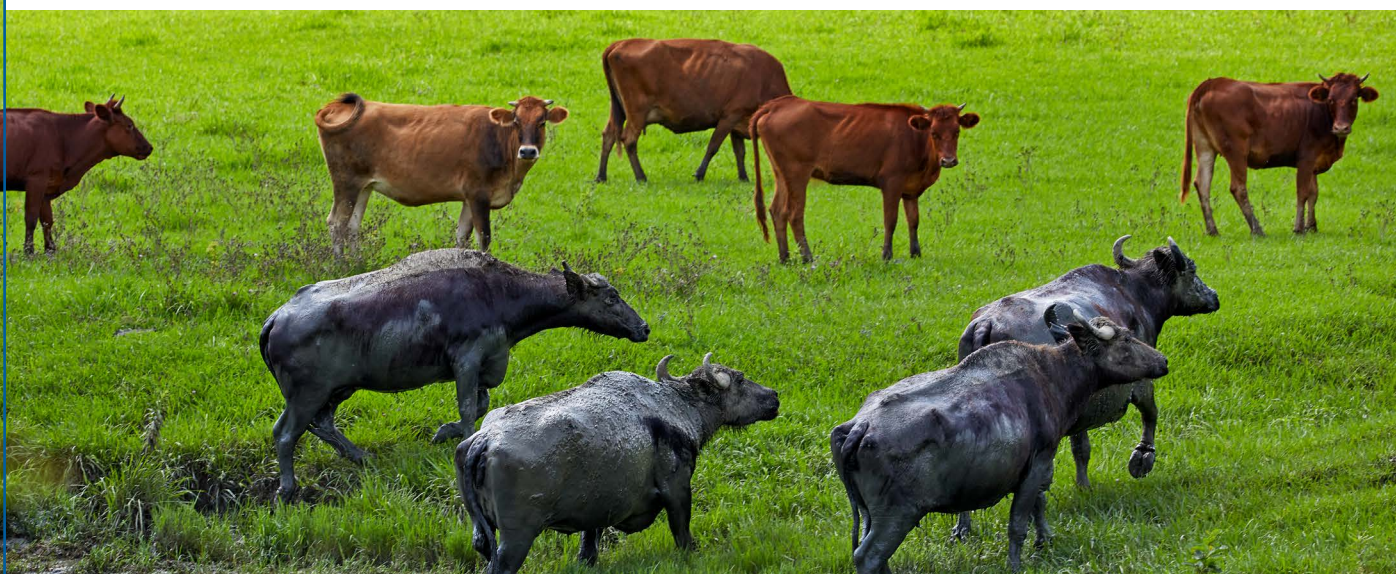
Encouraging local GI communities to engage in sustainability pathways

Public extension services and research and development efforts can help stakeholders demonstrate the link between GI products and their origin, and define GI specifications that ensure their long-term preservation. Empowerment should be central to this approach, and activities should be planned to gradually improve the technical and financial capacities of local stakeholders.

To help producers engage in sustainability pathways (across the three sustainability pillars: economic, social and environmental), and especially smallholders lacking capacities and resources, supportive actions can focus on:

- ↳ supporting the assessment and monitoring of the sustainability of GI systems through (external or self-) evaluation: providing funding, enabling the participation of experts, providing data;
- ↳ providing incentives towards GI sustainability, and especially for small GI systems and vulnerable categories of GI producers. For example, providing financial support to smallholders for investments that are required to comply with sustainability specifications (e.g. the adoption of organic production methods), or to cover certification costs until the system becomes financially autonomous; and
- ↳ facilitating the sharing of knowledge, capacity development and the provision of technical assistance, within the country and through international cooperation.

The right balance must be found between providing external support for GI development to local communities, and ensuring local ownership in the definition and management of the GI system.





A comprehensive policy and regulatory framework with a systemic approach to GI systems

The application of GI systems as a tool towards sustainable development and sustainable food systems requires a comprehensive approach i.e. a policy vision that encompasses the different objectives that can be targeted by policymakers through GI development (for example rural development, consumer protection, heritage preservation, sustainable diets, etc.). Defining the policy vision for GI systems can serve as a basis for the development of GI legislation.

The regulatory framework for GI protection could be strengthened to facilitate the integration of sustainability practices in GI schemes, in line with a product's origin-linked qualities. For example, the GI specifications could call for socially and environmentally responsible practices in the use of the resources involved in the production of the GI product. All requirements should always be decided upon by local producer local producer communities. Clear and transparent legislation can facilitate stakeholder participation in decision-making and implementation.

The examination of requests for GI registration is a fundamental stage during which many technical dimensions related to agriculture, food, industry or handicrafts must be considered, depending on the product category. To analyse the practices described in the proposed GI specifications and their related sustainability issues or benefits, public authorities should undertake a **collective and multidisciplinary examination** of the GI request, so as to combine all the general and specific competences needed. Collective examination also reduces the risk of a partial or subjective assessment.

For GIs that are already registered, a lighter procedure could be considered to revise specifications to allow for more sustainability and resilience in a context of climate change, while preserving the product-specific qualities and the capacities and property rights of existing GI users, in particular smallholders. Easier and quicker procedures could be designed for the re-examination and registration of revised specifications. The regular assessment of the impacts of GI specifications and their adjustment is crucial to ensure continuous improvement, especially in a context of climate change where certain practices may need to be adapted to new local conditions of production.

GI systems are impacted by a range of policies and legal instruments, not only those concerning marketing practices (e.g. fraud prevention, food safety standards or rules specific to small-scale or traditional producers), but also sectoral development strategies, financial support measures and policies regarding culture, tourism and gastronomy. The link with land tenure is also important. Concepts related to GI systems could be integrated more into research and education. A national platform could facilitate interministerial discussions and policy dialogue with the concerned private sectors, to identify and agree on synergies or possible improvements.

Policy efforts should also concern awareness raising, dissemination of best practices and knowledge sharing for all stakeholders. It is important to better inform and educate consumers, to allow them to make informed choices that contribute to the sustainability of their diets and to the sustainable development of GI territories. Among the many possible modalities of consumer information are official labels, which help consumers identify GI products quickly.

More efforts should go into practical research aimed at collecting evidence regarding and analysing impacts, success factors and best practices regarding the many dimensions of social and environmental sustainability. While a large body of literature on the socioeconomic impacts of GI processes already exists, the other dimensions of sustainability deserve to be investigated further, and particularly the emerging topics previously mentioned.





Bibliography

Belletti, G. & Marescotti, A. 2021. *Evaluating geographical indications. Guide to tailor evaluations for the development and improvement of geographical indications.* Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb6511en>

FAO. 2009. *Linking people, places and products. A guide for promoting quality linked to geographical origin and sustainable geographical indications.* Rome. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/debded43-9d99-5c74-a440-e8db347941ac>

FAO. 2021. *The nutrition and health potential of geographical indication foods.* Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb3913en>

FAO & European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. 2018. *Strengthening sustainable food systems through geographical indications. An analysis of economic impacts.* <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/18737EN>

FAO & oriGIn. (forthcoming). *Towards a full integration of sustainability in the framework of geographical indications. Practical guidelines and toolkit for groups to set up their priorities, assess and improve their GI system in light of the sustainability strategy for geographical indications.* Rome, FAO.



Authors

Emilie Vandecandelaere
Florence Tartanac

Acknowledgements

Reviewers: Teemu Viinikainen, Carmen Bullon, Lisa Paglietti
Editor: Ellen Pay
Design: studio Pietro Bartoleschi

This brief contributes to the Sustainable Food Systems Programme of the One Planet Network and its publication received support from the project '*Interagency support to the Work of the 10YFP on Sustainable Food Systems Programme*' (GCP/GLO/790/SWI).





FAO thematic website:
www.fao.org/geographical-indications

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Rome, Italy



Some rights reserved. This work is available
under a CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO licence

Required citation: FAO. 2023. *Using geographical indications to improve
sustainability – Lessons learned from 15 years of FAO work on geographical
indications*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc3891en>