




Geographical indications and rural bonds: narrating roles in Catalonia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how geographical indication organisations (GIOs) understand and explain geographical indications (GIs) as being a means to fostering agricultural and farming activities, improving rural communities and growing sustainability values. The research focused on the context of Catalonia (Spain), where 23 Protected Designations of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) operate for a range of food products. The study conducted qualitative research using interviews on 26 representatives and professionals regarding their activities, values and ways to face current challenges in the primary sector. In this context, GIOs articulated a narrative in the field of the economy, stressing relationships with markets (prices, promotion, commercialisation, product quality), but they also importantly commented on sociocultural initiatives in a range of aspects connected to rural communities (history and memory, territorial endeavour, generational replacement), and including the environmental issues (climate change, other species or landscapes). In this sense, the author explores the possibility of considering GIs as systems that interact with human and non-human agents in the rural. The focus on the narratives and self-reflection by GIOs helped to understand GIs role as drivers of territorial dynamism and rural resilience.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) adopts a regulatory framework on agriculture and fisheries, and has launched initiatives on food, in which quality labels attached to geographical indications (GIs) are key. GIs comprise Protected Designations of Origin (PDOs) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs) for food products and wine (European Commission, n/d a). GIs scheme date back to the 1990s and it is in accordance with the sustainable labelling framework of the EU and the broader “Farm to Fork Strategy” adopted later (European Commission, 2020). Foods with PDO are produced within a delimited region and each of the components of the product is grown and processed within that region. PGIs refer to food in which at least one stage of its processing or production is carried out within the region; hence, some components or processes can be produced or carried out outside the region. The current legal basis for these schemes is Regulation EU 2024/1143 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April, which updates previous regulations on the matter. Its introduction establishes that quality products “represent one of the biggest assets that the Union has, both for its economy and for its cultural identity” (Regulation (EU) 2024/1143).

Beyond-market aspects have a major role for the existence of GIs; EU policies consider that quality food labels are rooted in the idiosyncratic

cultures of regions and communities. Consistently, for both labels, the relationships with the rural places and peoples where they are produced or prepared is important; the organisations seeking to protect their GI names must submit evidence of the links between their products and the sites and regions. Some of the arguments put forward can be technical and physical, such as soil composition or climate conditions, but others are of a social and a cultural order. The Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Commission announced that it had registered 3,500 GI names, including food, agricultural products and spirits, and the economic impact of these labels was estimated at €77.1 billion in 2017 (European Commission, 2021). The EU regulation establishes that producers belonging to GIs may “agree on sustainable practices”, which means “a practice which contributes to one or more social, environmental or economic objectives” (Regulation (EU) 2024/1143, Art 7). The scheme is explained as “representing EU’s diverse culinary heritage” (European Commission, 2023) and purports that GIs “protect specific know-how, authenticity and agro-environmental conditions (European Commission, n/d b).

The aim of this article is to contribute to the study of geographical indication organizations (GIOs) related to the GIs roles and bonds with rural communities in the particular context of Catalonia (Spain). To achieve the goal, the focus on GIOs perception and reflection on GIs

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contribution as promoters of farming activities and the strengthening of rural resilience is necessary. Understanding GIs' roles needs research on organizational narratives and communication, visiting and observing their places. The focus on how producers argue around the impacts of GIs is growing within the research community, but less effort is done on how the GIOs explain these roles and impact. Furthermore, much of the existing qualitative research tends to focus on particular products or to a limited number of GIs. As we will see, this article addresses a significant number of them from an entire region.

In this context, a set of research questions is closely related to the issue: RQ1. How do GIOs define the role of GIs? RQ2. What elements do the GIOs highlight that link GI to rural development and resilience? RQ3. What are the challenges that GIOs face related to GI agriculture and farming? RQ4. How do GIOs see GIs future and what sort of action would they envisage? To find the answers, I relied on a qualitative research design focused on conversations and observations, visiting people and GIOs, listening to them and learning about GIs' roles and bonds with rural communities. In the following sections, I provide a research review on diverse approaches to GIs and rural economies, culture and society, including the environmental issues. After describing my methodological tools I report on how, in the Catalan context, the research questions could find explanations from the fieldwork. I conclude with a reflection on GIs interaction with rural communities and other than human agents in the countryside.

The systematic analysis of the Catalan GIOs conversations and the focus on the elements structured in the RQs provided insights about the roles of GIs. Most of them expressed initiatives and purpose beyond the economic and technical role of the schemes and almost all highlighted sociocultural aspects and activities—from identities to collective memory, cuisine, health or folklore, among others. Added to this, the environmental issues, from climate change to biodiversity, permitted to suggest an understanding of GIs as systemic assemblages interconnected in the agentic rural. All in all provided a broad picture of GIs impact in Catalonia and its rural life and how GIs contribute to circulate new imaginaries of the countryside.

2. Diverse facets of GIs

According to their regulation, GI labels aim to contribute fair competition, ensuring reliable information for consumers to guarantee the origin of the products, and fostering rural development by “providing support to agricultural and processing activities, preserving know-how and promoting specific quality products” (Regulation (EU) 2024/1143, Art 4). They are expected to improve working conditions or to help to preserving agricultural employment. Moreover, among other aspects, GI projects are planned as means for cultural reasons—like keeping farming traditions or culinary heritage—or to contribute to environmental goals, animal welfare, among other positive outcomes for rural communities. There is a body of research that backs some of these positive outputs but the study of GIs is complex, highly contextual, and dependent on conceptions and definitions that are not always commonly shared. In this field, we need to know more about how GIOs explain the role of GIs.

2.1. Economy and rural development

A family of research is critical towards the role of GIs. For example, some authors consider that GIs would be a sort of “club” using “regional name monopolies” that somehow would impose a “Roman”—understood as Italian and French—system on Northern countries (Thiedig & Sylvander, 2000, pp. 435–436). Establishing a protected label does not imply rural development progressions per se, or even a better relationship with rural communities (Coombe et al., 2014). The review on the research about how GI schemes contribute to local communities suggests that we need more evidence, and current arguments to back the sustainable development are still “unfamiliar, disparate and lack tools

(criteria and measuring methods)” (Barjolle, et al, 2011, p 103).

However, important contributions note a good impact of GIs for the rural. Overall, these authors agree that the effects of GIs on rural development are positive (Ceï et al., 2018a,b; Folkson, 2006). In more or less nuanced ways, many remarked on the GIs significance as economic stimuli or their links to regional development (Belletti et al., 2017; Borg & Cratzer, 2013; Ceï et al., 2018a; Conneely & Mahon, 2015; Crescenzi et al., 2022; Folkson, 2006; Marescotti & Belletti, 2016). The argument here is that GIs are “supportive of local culture and economies” in a global market scenario (Giovannucci et al., 2009b, p. 3 our emphasis), or that overall, they have a positive cultural and local impact (Giovannucci et al., 2009a; Vandecastelaere et al., 2009). However, more specifications about what is considered “impact” or even “local” are needed if we wish to know about their influence in rural economies. According to this, some authors argued the need to better define the concept of “development” and, in the Irish context, they upheld that GIs follow preeminent top-down institutional processes and practices and should require more bottom-up dynamics (Conneely & Mahon, 2015). After interviewing producers and farmers, these authors concluded that “discourses of rural development and sustainability remain marginal” (Conneely & Mahon, 2015, p. 20, our emphasis). We observe how language and discourse surrounding GIs constitute such an important aspect to reflect upon.

An amount of research on GI food focuses on public awareness, marketing issues and preferences on consumers' decision making (Espejel et al., 2008; Fandos & Flavián, 2006; Gracia & De-Magistris, 2016; Grunert & Aachmann, 2016; Kizos, 2013; Krystallis & Ness, 2005; Menapace et al., 2011). Some defend that the willingness to pay for these products can be substantial (Aprile et al., 2012; Dogan & Gokovali, 2012; Menapace et al., 2011). For example, research about olive oil choices stated that consumers were willing to pay a premium price for products labelled with a PDO, followed by other choices labelled “organic farming” and PGI (Aprile et al, 2012). In the Canadian context, consumers also showed a willingness to pay for premium GI olive oil, with some predominance of PDO; however “the additional premiums for GIs (and in particular for PDO) are relatively smaller than the premium for the COO (Italy)” (Menapace et al., 2011, p. 209).¹ These studies connect GI labels with growing value in terms of return for quality standards.

But is the economy and rural development the main reason for GIs being set up and settling in a specific place? The correlation between GI labels—specifically PDO—and lagging areas are signalled as an argument to consider them as potentially positive for rural communities, including environmental values and cultural landscapes (Flinzberger et al., 2022). It is a fact that GI labels are unequally distributed in Europe, with a higher prevalence in the southern part of the continent due to several reasons that may include climate aspects, food cultures or public support (Albuquerque et al., 2018; Krystallis et al., 2017). Regional food cultures appear to be more relevant than the characteristics of agricultural productivity—like quantities of agricultural production or size of the exploitations—or support from public institutions—in aid or structures (Joosse et al., 2021). The latter research hold that “the more similarity exists between production and consumption the more labels will occur” (Joosse et al., 2021, p. 209).

Another aspect, which may be more relevant than the latitude (northern or southern) of the region or country and rather neglected in the literature, is the specific nature and the GIs governance. In the same region we can find very diverse, even antagonistic approaches to food labels and their cultural entanglement with communities. It is a matter that depends on factors ranging from the structures operating within the scheme (whether cooperatives, farmers, brands, etc.) to more essentially the sociocultural approach to rural communities and small producers (more or less inclusive and open, higher or lower sensitivity towards

¹ COO is country of origin in this research piece.

their realities, better or worse at achieving environmental goals, etc.). Overall, the literature review reinforces the idea that GIs can act positively for local and rural economies, but more evidence on the mechanisms of how this happens is needed, as well to ascertain how their value is transferred to producers. In addition, we need a clearer set of definitions of rural development and the rationales governing the political economy of the schemes.

2.2. Sociocultural matters

Critical perspectives also exist towards the cultural impact of GI schemes. Some are reluctant towards the notion of “cultural protection” affirming that GIs can become a protectionist tool, and that their implementation “invents traditions, dilutes culture and distorts identity” (Broude, 2005a, p. 21, see also Broude, 2005b) or others signalling some impact on the homogenisation of local diversity (Welz, 2013). Limitations also apply to the consideration of them as tools for the “preservation of cultural identity” (Cardoso et al., 2022, p. 709). In this debate, one key concept is the notion of “tradition”, understood as collective cultural heritage to be protected.² Some authors point out a paradox: GI projects are expected to keep traditions and at the same time implement innovation. The formula that these authors suggest to overcome the situation is management that observes “cooperative rules” and, in these efforts, “the social organisation of the producers and the entire market chain gives these products their final characteristics” (Allaire, et al., 2011, p. 5).

Context is always relevant. In the case of North America, for example, the protective notion of European GIs does not apply but there are initiatives to recognise and value the origin of the products under what Barham et al. (2011) named American Origin Products (AOP). The authors noted that “the promotion of traditional American Indian foods at home can generate pride among younger tribal members regarding their food traditions and encourage their inclusion in more healthy diets” (Barham et al., 2011, p. 127). GI labels are seen as potential self-esteem devices that can attract young farmers to adhere to the schemes.

International comparisons shed more light on a complex relationship between GI food labels, rural development, and local cultures. Context is determinant and both aspects remarked: some levels of institutional or governmental involvement and stressing “the interplay of tradition, authenticity and terroir” (Bowen, 2010, p. 237). This becomes a condition for the proper local embedding of GI schemes. To sum up, GI labels need appropriate embeddedness that not only considers supply chains, market context or consumer values but, essentially, social and cultural dimensions of the territory in which the products are prepared (Barham, 2003; Parrott et al., 2002; Sonnino, 2007).

The “heritage argument” for GIs to operate in a specific context is unavoidable and does not dismantle other “instrumental arguments” (Gangjee, 2012, 2017). GI schemes can act as consolidators and means to recognise cultural norms and, in specific locations, have been considered a “potential to resist the erasure of place in global agrifood” (Rangnekar, 2011, p. 2054). Some studies have even proposed that GI labelling is not just about quality schemes to assure origins or traditional elements but can even act as nation branding tools too (Bardone & Spalvěna, 2019; Ranta & Ichijo, 2022). Unavoidably, this activates the perils of using GI brands in stereotyped ways, cultural appropriation dynamics or the commodification of collective heritage (Hull, 2016). To avoid these dynamics would require GIs’ management to be connected with sociocultural and environmental values and sustainable communities (Bowen & Zapata, 2009).

² There is an EU label (Traditional Speciality Guaranteed, TSG)—different from PDO and PGI—devoted to recognizing the traditional methods of preparation to “generate added value” to contribute to “a fair income for producers” and also helping to the “achievement of rural development policy objectives” (Regulation EU 2024/1143, Art 52).

In their official applications to the EU scheme, GIs’ documents not only use sociocultural narratives to evidence the links of the products with the territories and communities but also produce stories attached to the communities, their culture and social aspects (Castelló, 2020). The communicative and symbolic dimensions of food GI labels are increasingly studied, and some authors point to a relationship between regional cultures, media production and food narratives (Castelló et al., 2023; Ferrari, 2014; Skuras & Dimara, 2004). However, less is known about GIOs’ self-reflection and narratives about GIs’ role and values, including socioeconomic ones and environmental sustainability.

We could suspect that higher levels of social and cultural bonds with local food production and consumption, and stronger links between the role of food for sociability (e.g. food-based local festivities), cultural traditions and social engagement (e.g. folkloric expressions attached to food products), or immaterial cultural aspects (memories, language uses, cultural production within music, arts), are elements that should reinforce GIs food presence. But consistent markers to assess these bonds remain to be evidenced and there is insufficient research to better ground these ideas. Of course, having GIs is not an indicator of strong local and cultural bonds with food. Overall, the research on GI labels and their social and cultural impacts highlight interactive dynamics: they are rooted in sociocultural networks whose storytelling relies on aspects like memories and history, folklore and popular culture, traditions and identities, languages and vernacular expressions, and at the same time GI schemes feed these representations and impact the communities’ cultures.

2.3. Environment and beyond human agency

Comparative research on North American labels and European GIs stresses the convenience of balancing production, processes and place (PPP), including environmental and sustainability values, for “constructing the difference” that can increase their value (Ilbery et al., 2005, p. 118). Therefore, some PPP initiatives—to which GIs would belong—highlight and spread imaginaries attached to this difference that strongly rely on place (locality, environment, terroir) and culture (tradition, food heritage, history). In the UK, for example, researchers identified three sorts of imaginary used by labels: wider country/region (rural landscapes), specific places (rivers, farms, valleys), and humans (people, farmers) (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000). Other researchers investigating the olive oil sector suggested that GI products can prevent agricultural intensification and potentially be positive for nature and an opportunity for the “territorialisation of environmentally friendly production rules” (Belletti et al., 2015, p. 106).

Yet, there are some critical views of GIs’ contribution to biodiversity and a research on cheese making supported more alternative and slow food schemes to ensure microbiology diversity in their production (Mariani et al., 2022). This is a relevant study to ours; from a discursive approach it would break the common distinction between nature and culture when approaching to GIs. Added to this, some other studies have noted the possibility of considering GI food within the rationales of common goods (Barbara, 2018; Castelló et al., 2023; Edelmann et al., 2020; Quiñones-Ruiz et al., 2020; Quiñones-Ruiz et al., 2015). This would lead them to be understood similarly to what we do with natural resources. All these contributions are relevant to see GI products under different lenses and to my final reflection to them. Seeing GIs under this light opens a perspective not only in terms of governance, but also in connection with collective heritage and the environment. If considered common-pool resources and naturcultural devices, how communities make sense of GI schemes and how are they governed require reviewing.

In this socioenvironmental facet, I am exploring a broader and inclusive vision of GIs to consider these schemes and organisations as nodes for action. This is especially interesting when assessing GIs’ environmental aspects and other than human bonds with the rural. Adopting a posthuman perspective greatly helps to better understand how GIs interact not only with people (humans), like producers and

policymakers, but how they become agents entangled with other than human agencies (varieties and genetics, climate conditions and natural resources, non-human animals and fungi, geologies and soils, chemicals and fungus, etc.). In this article, I will not properly develop this perspective but, under the light of posthuman critical thought (Braidotti, 2019) and the consideration of vibrant materialities and distributive agencies (Bennett, 2010;), GI products appear to be nodes of interconnected assemblages. GI schemes would affect and be affected by landscapes, mountains and crops, water flows, animals or natural sceneries.

All in all, there is a myriad of perspectives towards GIs' impact on rural communities. The research on the environmental impact of GIs is on its way but my view is that rural realities demand better exploring the entanglements between discourse and materialities (Carpentier, 2024). The issue cannot be tackled from the abstract; broad and deep research on case studies, sharing time and listening to people and their arguments, observing environments and GIs interaction is required.

3. Catalan *terrors* and GIs

Farmers and rural communities are diverse and respond in many ways to GIs schemes as collective projects. Spain is an active country in registering food and drink GI labels with the EU scheme. At the time of the present research (first half of 2025), the EU database eAmbrosia (European Commission, 2025) returned 219 records for Spanish labelled products. Among them, 23 GIs operated from Catalonia (12 PDO and 11 PGI). This is a dynamic list (Table 1), which started in 1996 with some of the pioneer olive oil GIs in Europe like PDO Les Garrigues, to some of the newest cheese registered in 2023, PGI Formatge de la Garrotxa. Five of them are olive oil PDOs. Catalan GIs are united in the Federació Catalana DOP-IGP (Catalan PDO-PGI Federation), that represents and coordinates actions among the regional GI projects.³ The whole structure of Catalan GIs, in 2025, was a complex network of 20,500 producers, 265 manufacturers, 154 business and 16 farmers associated in a Federation coordinating efforts and synergies (Federació Catalana DOP-IGP, 2025b).

The Catalan government (Generalitat de Catalunya) has a legal corpus that structures the rules and requirements that PDO and PGI must follow (Parlament de Catalunya, 2003; 2006). The government not only regulates GIs but also gives support to them. The Department of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food organises activities and devotes resources to promotion and advertising campaigns of the Federation. For example, the motto of the January 2025 campaign, displayed in the trains of Ferrocarrils de la Generalitat (Catalan Government railways), was “Tria'ns! Busca els aliments amb DOP-IGP” (Choose us! Look for PDO-PGI food) (Federació Catalana DOP-IGP, 2025a). It was promoted using a hot air balloon and on posters and in media campaigns.

GI stories are also connected to Catalan culture and traditions. To illustrate this I can name some cases like PGI Pa de Pagès Català (literally Catalan peasant's bread). One of the basics of Catalan gastronomy is, precisely, *pa amb tomàquet*—a slice of *pa de pagès* bread rubbed with small, matured tomatoes and drizzled in olive oil. We could argue on the links of the country's culinary culture with other products like beans (*mongetes* and *fesols*) to cured sausage (*llonganissa*), nougat (*torró*) and, of course, olive oil, with diverse GI labels. But this collaborative and, in principle, cohesive picture is more complex. One of the aspects that I rapidly appreciated when approaching them was their great diversity, their specificities. Therefore, although as we will see, they face many common challenges and projects on similar goals and futures, the headline that best describes the whole is that “every GI project is a world of its own”: this means diversity and specificity—due to their product types, their structures, their governing and leadership styles, their histories, their economic results, their internationalisation, etc.

Table 1
Registered Catalan PDO and PGI.

	Name	Product	File number	Date of registration
1	Les Garrigues	olive oil	PDO-ES-0070	21/6/1996
2	Siurana	olive oil	PDO-ES-0072	21/6/1996
3	Pollo y Capón del Prat	poultry	PGI-ES-0095	21/6/1996
4	Avellana de Reus	hazelnut	PDO-ES-0046	20/2/1999
5	Queso de l'Alt Urgell y la Cerdanya	cheese	PDO-ES-0094	7/11/2000
6	Salchichón de Vic / Llonganissa de Vic	dry sausage	PGI-ES-0119	29/12/2001
7	Turrón de Agramunt / Torró d'Agramunt	nougat	PGI-ES-0167	11/7/2002
8	Calçot de Valls	onion	PGI-ES-0171	31/5/2002
9	Manzana de Girona / Poma de Girona	apple	PGI-ES-0154	26/8/2003
10	Clementinas de las Tierras del Ebro / Clementines de les Terres de l'Ebre	clementine	PGI-ES-0173	23/9/2003
11	Mantequilla de l'Alt Urgell y la Cerdanya / Mantega de l'Alt Urgell i la Cerdanya	butter	PDO-ES-0187	22/11/2003
12	Aceite de Terra Alta / Oli de Terra Alta	olive oil	PDO-ES-0245	5/2/2005
13	Patatas de Prades / Patates de Prades	potato	PGI-ES-0232	16/2/2007
14	Aceite del Baix Ebre-Montsià / Oli del Baix Ebre-Montsià	olive oil	PDO-ES-0274	7/2/2008
15	Arroz del Delta del Ebro / Arròs del Delta de l'Ebre	rice	PDO-ES-0336	28/10/2008
16	Pera de Lleida	pear	PDO-ES-0698	12/3/2011
17	Mongeta del Ganxet	bean	PDO-ES-0636	23/12/2011
18	Pa de Pagès Català	bread	PGI-ES-0880	20/2/2013
19	Oli de l'Empordà / Aceite de L'Empordà	olive oil	PDO-ES-1161	10/3/2015
20	Fesols de Santa Pau	bean	PDO-ES-1226	31/7/2015
21	Gall del Penedès	poultry	PGI-ES-01308	14/6/2016
22	Ternera de los Pirineos Catalanes / Vedella dels Pirineus Catalans / Vedell des Pyrénées Catalanes	veal	PGI-ES + FR-1042	5/4/2016
23	Formatge Garrotxa / Queso Garrotxa	cheese	PGI-ES-02876	20/12/2023

Source: Author's own elaboration from eAmbrosia (European Commission, 2025).

4. Method notes

This article reports on a fieldwork conducted between March and May 2025 in Catalonia. I conducted 20 interviews, covering 21 GI labels of the 23 available (Table 1), and involving 26 people.⁴ I made on-site visits to the offices in the villages or cities where each organisation

⁴ Two GI labels are managed at the same GIO, some interviews were held with more than one person. The interviewees' profiles were diverse: 13 presidents, six secretaries, five professionals, and two producers. Interviewees were 17 men and nine women. In a highly masculinized farming sector (at the moment, only two women hold GI presidencies of the 23 in Catalonia), this gender representation in the study was an achievement. In the results report, I use formulas for their anonymization. I had the audiovisual assistance of one colleague for the scheduling and recording of the interviews (see acknowledgements).

³ Since this point, I will refer this as “the Federation”.

operates from north (Pyrenees) to south (the Valencian border), located in a variety of places ranging from cities with more than a hundred thousand inhabitants like Lleida or Reus, to inland rural areas with just a few dozen inhabitants.

The overall length of recordings was 14 h and 21 min, but I spent more time conversing with them, before and after the recordings. The average interview length was 34 min, but two of them were longer than an hour, and three slightly shorter than 30 min. In most cases, I visited their facilities, crops and production sites. In addition, I interviewed the Federation too and I drew up observation notes on my fieldwork. Some of them provided promotional materials and I read a variety of documents ranging from books to leaflets, bookmarks, packaging or posters, and even a children's story. They were relevant to see how GIs produce specific storytelling of rural life and stress narratives and salient elements that are contained in pictures, texts, and commercial promotions. Some of the interviewees proudly offered small samples of their product to taste. I collected all sort of impressions and lived meaningful experiences—including the massive electrical blackout in Spain in 2025 during one of these meetings.

They were in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a method defined as conversations oriented to specific purposes that help to achieve knowledge on certain topics and issues (Hennink et al., 2010). The method mixed the ethnographic approach with a narrative analysis of the materials, oriented to understanding organisational dynamics (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 1998). The purpose of the conversations was for each GIO to explain the roles and bonds of GIs with rural communities, focusing on communicative action and promotional tasks. A specific questionnaire was prepared for each case with some general questions, though adapted to particular elements. I provided the questionnaire before the meeting and organised the conversations into four blocks: (1) general introduction of the GI, structure, mission, geographical delimitations, varieties and product properties; (2) values of the GIs, communication and narratives they handle on ruralities, rural communities, sociocultural bonds and environmental issues; (3) particular initiatives and GI promotional action, from fairs to festivities or gastronomic events; and (4) challenges and projects to improve the GI in the near future. In the conversation, GIOs would talk about economic, sociocultural and environmental issues and would explain their role towards ruralities: overall, they mentioned economic challenges, rural development initiatives, relationships with producers and villagers, the links with local cultures, traditions and festivities, and other elements related to product varieties, or environmental aspects and the consequences of global warming.

The conversations were processed using a qualitative analysis software which provide automatic text transcriptions.⁵ The project yielded quotations, and I carefully listened to all the materials and manually labelled 896 excerpts using 63 codes, including interviewees (26), topics and subtopics (37). I checked my fieldwork notes, reviewed GI materials and coded the quotations organizing the categories into three fields: Economy and policies, Culture and communities, Environment and nature. Within these three I managed subcodes to organise a grounded scheme connecting topics, arguments and issues. I wrote twenty memos, one for each GI, considering on-site experiences and observations.

Qualitative narrative analysis to study organisations is designed on a bottom-up rationale in the sense that coding rises from the stories and observations. The process implies listening and reading the texts and coding elaborated notions on the issues raised in the conversation. Relevant elements emerge by recurrent ideas expressed by the informants (I); the researcher can link them to other codes or ideas. The selection of the quotations that encapsulate key arguments is important and they are enriched with the summaries and observations in the fieldwork. For example, one participant said: “We find that it is much necessary to make visible the task and the figure of the producer for the

people to recognise that after this [product] there is a family who eats, there is a field which is cared, there is a village that has activity, a small shop or industry” (I2). This is a narrative with actants—the GIO (we), the GI product, the producer, the people, the family, the field, the village, the small shop, the industry), actions (finding, making visible, recognising, eating, caring, having activity)— and there is a main topic—the producers subcode within the Economy and policies field is activated for its later analysis. This quotation is identified as relevant because it encapsulates a recurrent idea contained in other conversations and expresses the notion in a comprehensible structure. Added to this, it was coherent with my observation notes and the memo that I wrote after my fieldwork. Collecting and working with qualitatively meaningful quotations provides relevant data.

All qualitative research requires a reflection on the self, on how the researcher impacts their own study and questions their role. The interviews were planned as purposive conversations, so I unavoidably framed the issues when using specific language. At the beginning I explained about the project and its aims while the conversation started and my audiovisual assistant prepared the devices (microphones, recorder, etc.). Apart from contributing to the knowledge on GIs I was motivated by my interest in local food and rural life. I am myself committed to more resilient rural communities, improving environmental aspects, enhancing food quality and safety, and contributing, at large, to rural vitality. In this regard, I am aware that any human activity is connected to distributed agencies and other than human assemblages; GI products, labels and professionals are participating in these networks.

5. Results

Although in this research on GI's roles and rural communities I raised many sociocultural and communicative issues, economic matters accounted for almost the half of the relevant quotations during the conversations. The economy and policymaking field was the most salient in quantitative terms; this surely means that GI projects are explained, above all, as economic devices.

GIOs are clear about what two most important missions are, and some of them stated them from the outset: controlling and certifying quality, as well as promoting the product. And within this economic focus, promotion and quality were among the two most grounded subtopics in the conversations. This established, cultural and human community-based aspects gained relevance and evidenced the strong sociocultural roots of GIs; here there is salience on memory and history, culinary elements or the attachment of products to villages and places (*el territori*). In some cases—e.g. direct products from cultivars like olive oil or fruit, or GIs in natural high valued areas—the environmental issues had a weight. Although overall this was a less commented field, aspects related to global warming, drought and water supply were especially relevant. We need to inspect their stories more closely.

5.1. It's the economy...

In the conversation there is a running argument on the links between the economy of the GI projects and the quality of life of rural communities. The exchange confirms that they help to increase the value of the agricultural/food production and this enables getting better prices in the market and, ultimately, better transferring by paying it to the producers. This would lead to more resilient communities in rural areas, increase the likelihood of generational renewal, and strengthen sociocultural bonds and environmental practices. This is the argument that bold the GIs economic grounds. One experienced representative expressed it very clearly:

“It [the GI] was set up for the economic aspect. In the end, people knew that if we gave value to our product, it would also be worth more money, and that people could live from the work they were doing. This is so basic and so important. Because without farmers we

⁵ Atlas.ti, version 25.

won't have [product], we won't have a GI, we won't have anything (...). If you do not fulfil the economic side, you cannot find the social. First, regarding sustainability, we must be sustainable in every way, but if we are not economically sustainable, the rest is very complicated, very difficult" (I23).

Therefore, economic sustainability is a priority for farming. To make this happen, a "fair price", "correct price", "stable price", "good price" is crucial (I6, I12, I16, I18, I23, I26). "All of this is linked, if you pay better, what you are doing is building people's loyalty to the territory. And what you are doing is also culture because it is your own product that you are establishing" (I18). Consistently, GI labels would be a tool to get fair trade with the producers, and this is at the basis of the value transfer to rural communities.

However, there are counterparts in this equation, and the first is the cost. Many of them expressed that producing within the GI quality scheme means higher costs in time, less production quantity and other efforts—like paperwork. High quality products, offering premium and extra standards, are often a small part of the overall production (I1, I3, I6, I8, I9, I26). So, producers are constantly calculating this relationship between cost and revenue, and one of the challenges for GIOS is to argue that, in the end, quality is the front line of their competitive power. Some expressed that they would like to attract more producers but they need a better cost-benefit ratio (I1; I3, I7, I8).

Second, consumers must be aware of the quality and the values under the GIs and be willing to pay more for the product. In this matter of the consumers' appraisal of GIs' products, some mentioned France as a model to follow (I6, I11). Promotion is then a good tool to sensitise consumers to buy local, quality, GI products. And promotion is not understood as advertising or marketing as usual, but broadly as communicating and promoting the quality label and the values involved. Most of the GI's communication and promotion use a website, some social media or promotional events, but the majority expressed that they do not have a sufficient structure or resources. And they sometimes nuanced their communicative role: "In promotion, what we have to do is to make ourselves visible. As a regulatory council, we want people to identify it as a quality [product], a high quality [product]" (I11).

Time is important; the time that natural processes need, for plants and animals to grow or to allow fermenting agents to do the job with wheat, for cheese to mature, etc.. Food quality processes need time to achieve specific standards, volumes or compositions. Having time to produce is related to higher quality too (I7, I14), sometimes involving manual work (I16). They seek to distinguish GIs products from those that are massively, rapidly and more industrially produced: "Nutritionally speaking it's completely different (...) I don't mean to say that the industrial [product] is bad, or that it is not safe food, obviously it meets the standards, but nutritionally it is not the same" (I14). GIOS do not foment an idyllic notion of agriculture attached to how things were done in the old days—that we could consider belonging to an urban imaginary to the rural—but take a pragmatic perspective adapted to current times and contexts. Consistently, they seek the modernisation of production and support innovation and research; these are requisites for sustainable production. Regarding the processes of mechanisation and automatisisation, some producers are exploring more efficient methods and GIOS argue how they need to be compatible with the GI quality standards. This is often related to generational renewal (I6, I11, I12; I26).

"Because today men and women farmers are entrepreneurs, they must fine-tune the numbers very well to get them right. They must ensure the quality of the [product] (...), and they are business people. So, they are automating more and more operations, investing, and this makes the young people also seeing, with this, some future prospects" (I6).

When promoting the product, they are committed to the recognition of the producers and the rural communities. They are commonly

referred to as "the families" (I2, I6, I11, I15, I21, I22). "We find it really necessary to make visible the task and the figure of the producer for the people to recognise that behind this [product] there is a family that eats, there is a crop that is looked after, there is a village that has an activity, a shop or an industry" (I2). The primary sector is undergoing a process of property concentration, but Catalan GIOS are champions of small and medium-sized farming economies. However, these family producers are seen as those who suffer the worst consequences of globalization and the struggling to adapt to volatile markets.

The notion of "protection" is linked with prices, with quality, and with production. These were related subcategories. Some of the smaller GIs expressed their frustration, before getting the quality label, at seeing that the supermarkets and shops were selling lower quality products using their local name: "We applied for it [the GI label], rather than with the intention of protecting ourselves, for protecting a source of life, for protecting a crop, a culture, a series of things, than for marketing purposes. We didn't have a need for marketing" (I4). This was the intention: to have a tool to protect producers from free riders—if we approach the theories of the commons—who could sell products of inferior quality naming places or varieties without sharing costs, and without taking care of immaterial heritage.

The administration has a role to stop the abandonment of the primary sector at large. A petition was made to the policymakers to improve control and regulation to better protect the producers under a GI label from unfair competition. Some mentioned the need for inspections of companies that, outside of a GI scheme, tend to use specific naming without being subject to the strict rules and quality controls applicable to the latter (I7, I23). Some of the criticism was also towards imported food products, commonly from outside of the EU, that are not equally controlled (I21). Added to this, others noted that distribution concentration processes can lead to the dominance of the agrifood industry by just a few agents. The idea was against big fish eating little fish and pointed to the role of policymakers to revert this situation (I15). Collaboration—with other GI products, with institutions, with rural communities—was highly stressed (I2, I4, I6, I11, I15, I23) using expressions like "individuality weakens us" (I15) or "the competitor is not the neighbouring village" (I23).

Summing up, a desired role mentioned by GIOS is to transfer GIs higher value from the market to the producers in rural places. They argue that they act certifying quality and promoting GIs value towards diverse actors. However, they also warn of diverse premises that complicate the economic equation. Among other challenges, they highlighted the consumers' trend to focus on lower price; the global chains' injection of products without the same quality and control; the pressure on lowering costs while keeping safety and environmental standards; or the highly strict control and excessive paperwork. A shared message, however, was that beyond the economic and structural complexities that each one faces, there are common challenges related to the resilience of the rural.

5.2. Human pasts and futures

If I mention that some parts of the conversations turned to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) or the Dictatorship (1939–1975), some might say we went too far. But this was the case. Within the field of culture and communities, history/memory was the most grounded subcode. For example, in the Ebro region, where some of the bloodiest battles took place in 1938, poor agriculture and olive tree crops were the only means for subsistence. Scarcity is engraved in the Catalan rural community's unconscious. Olive crops, landscape and collective memory shape complex assemblages of the material and the immaterial. The same can be said of the migratory processes during the Francisco Franco regime. Some GIOS mentioned when, in the nineteen fifties and sixties, thousands of people arrived from rural areas to the villages and neighbourhoods near Barcelona, or Girona, and brought their local varieties of plants and animals with them. Others commented when a brand-new

village was founded with migrants to colonise the Ebro Delta—the regime used the Instituto Nacional de Colonización to promote the so-called *pueblos de colonización* in the agrarian regions of Spain.⁶

At times, the storytelling they told relates to the memories of the grandparents (*els iaios*) and elements connected with identities and immaterial heritage (language and ways of calling crop or product varieties, tools, elaboration procedures, etc.); or when the product trade fair was cancelled after the Civil War and was only recovered after the transition to democracy; or when a great plague or severe frost destroyed all the crops and forced the rural areas to start again from scratch. All these stories were also part of their backgrounds (in different ways, I1, I6, I12, I20, I22). Overall, collective memories are embedded in GI products like footprints and are part of their richness.

Having protected quality schemes and people who still make a living from farming and agricultural produce is something that connects with their rural pasts. Uniting under cooperatives and working collaboratively was one of the ways to keep these roots, and having GI recognition was something that enhanced collective self-esteem and pride: “Here, we’ve had up to a thousand [product] farming families. In every village you see here (...) there were ten [farmers], and every house had [product]. And [the product] was a way out of subsistence, because in times past, households lived by exchanging goods” (I6). However, some cases they expressed that the “bucolic” way in which most of the population regard farmers’ and peasants’ life differs from their own understandings and experience. “They [the producers] are proud of their work, but (...) there is a mixture, I mean, between their usual values and their culture. In the end, it is a way of life” (I8).

The sense of pride and the achievement of higher quality standards is related to a great challenge for the agriculture and the farming sectors in the region: generational renewal. Some acknowledged their role in trying to get young people involved, and “they [the GIs] can be useful and are being useful” (I3), and even to contribute to slowing down depopulation because “we hope that this [having a GI] can be a tool to keep people in the territory, an additional tool” (I4). Concerning the relationship between having a protected GI label and involving young farmers, some expressed that “more young people are getting on the bandwagon to harvest [product] and try to improve quality. It’s the solution” (I9); and “without a GI, [we have] zero future prospects” (I4). However, it must be said that here the situation is so acute that the overall position was rather pessimistic and one of the tougher challenges is that young farmers are abandoning the primary sector and the average age of farmers is getting too high.⁷

When promoting products at fairs, some GIOs hold a producers’ exhibition. It is when the farmers can meet the end customers. They value popular fairs and events at which many people interact with farmers very highly:

“You [as customer] put a face to the producers. And for the producers too... even though it is the busiest time, coming [to the city], having them [the customers] waiting for you [the farmer], having people say, ‘oh, [the product] had already run out’ (...) The truth is that I think that fairs...—that there was a debate about whether they were a thing of the last century—, I think that they are updated. It is the direct contact that nothing can replace” (I11).

They also explained on a list of activities related to educational and dissemination activities. GIOs participate in a wide range of popular happenings and collaborative events addressing the public to talk about the properties of their products, and to offer the product in *dégustations* in which experts talk about how the producers achieve their qualities (aromas, textures). A lot of them organise product itineraries,

gastronomic events with talks, or show cooking, also tasting sessions for all sort of publics (in different ways, I1, I5, I7, I9, I13, I20, I21, I24, I25). The Federation also published a recipe book and launched a campaign with a popular culinary influencer visiting all the places and talking about the products and the dishes that can be made with them. These sessions are part of a wider role as GI product ambassadors. Finally, they are connected to social and cultural life, within a range of expressions from literature to film; for example, each year the Federation collaborates with the Gaudí Awards, the Prizes of the Catalan Film Academy (*Federació Catalana DOP-IGP, 2025c*), and one established links with the works of a local artist, while others mentioned connections with writers in their conversations (I1, I21, I24).

5.3. Entangled with the environment

Environmental aspects are the third relevant element that engages GI products and labels with the rural. Here, issues related to climate change, biodiversity and landscape were mentioned. The conversation specifically touched global warming because it is a challenge for agricultural and farming production. Some expressed that GI products are seriously affected by high temperatures and drought (I2, I4, I9, I17). Having access to water was cited as being crucial for the sustainability of the crops (I1, I2, I11). Water scarcity and higher temperatures were, at times, related to research and innovation. Some of them are highly active, collaborating with research projects to save water or to find more resilient mechanisms and implementing smart agricultural methods (I2, I15, I21). There were also some critical views towards current water management and restrictive measures, usually affecting agriculture before any other sector.

The GIOs remarked that GIs positively contribute to keeping a healthy environment and landscape. They support to create and upkeep a “mosaic” that prevents the forest from colonising the meadows and to maintain “natural firewalls” (I6). This was especially important in areas that had suffered huge wildfires in the last decades, partially due to the abandonment of the agricultural sector and the loss of the crops, where bushes and trees colonise the land. Here GI projects are seen as a means to keep the agricultural lands producing and facilitate to controlling fuels, that jointly with warming and drought, generate an acute risk of the so-called sixth generation wildfires. In some cases, GI producers are taking care of millenary olive trees that conforms a cultural landscape. In others, they stressed the GI role in keeping complementarities and diversifications: “One of the values of the GI that people see is that the farmers are suffering as caretakers of the landscape, especially in tourist areas like ours. The landscape of the [region] without the olive trees cannot be understood. It is a value that the administration should give to the people who cultivate these lands” (I22). Consistently, they consider a role to balancing tourism and agriculture (I16).

GI projects’ contribution to biodiversity was mentioned because some of them are protecting “traditional” varieties and species that are less productive but remain in the areas thanks to the farmers. The market and the competitive rationales (faster production, customer preferences, costs, etc.) had sentenced these species to disappearance. Some remarked that years ago there was a far greater diversity of products: “We have recovered some. We try to promote and disseminate them” (I8). Selecting and mixing is seen as a traditional way to generate biodiversity in rural areas. Tradition and biodiversity were connected with GIs this way. Some other see GIs labels as a trigger of biodiversity, because the use of chemical products on GI production crops is greatly restricted and they keep high environmental standards.

A couple stressed the habitats that the GI crops provide for many species. However, there are also conflictive relationships with some non-human companions. For example, some interviewees remarked on the new plagues—sometimes due to climate change—that they must deal with each year, or the invasive animals that damage their crops, or global diseases that put livestock at risk, etc. Others are living close to or even within protected natural parks. Overall, the protection of wild

⁶ For a recent review see Cabezas Vega et al., 2025.

⁷ In Catalonia, the average age of the workers in the agrarian sector is between 57 and 69 years old, depending on the size of the productions (*Generalitat de Catalunya, 2024*).

species is usually a complicated matter for agriculture and farming. Wilderness were mentioned as perhaps interesting for tourist or environmentalist activities, but a problem when animals invade the crops in large numbers. In spite of this, they generally expressed agreement with balanced protection, and talked about a need for co-existence (I1, I4, I5). One interesting concept that one noted was the notion of “balance”. They showed respect for ecological measures but they remarked that farming implies a need for equilibrium and proportion, and “the balance is sustainable farming production” (I15). Another noted that “nature does not provide food, and if it does, it’s because a farmer is working for that (...) If there is no farmer, nature alone does not give us food” (I23). They expressed that a beautiful landscape and wilderness differ from a vibrant rural life.

And this was one of the important contributions that bring me to understand how GI projects are entanglements between humans and non-humans, being natural-cultural entities in the interaction of a system working together. I appreciated the extent to which GI schemes can be considered assemblages that interact with human and other than human communities in the countryside—including plant and animal varieties, physical and climatic elements, geologies and soils, habitats and landscapes. Considering a posthuman approach to GIs, they would contribute to complex networks of interactions. Affecting and being affected by people, plants, animals, lands, climate, technologies, governments, research agencies and institutes, etc., is evident when talking about GI products.

6. Conclusion

Listening to the GIOs and observing the activities around GIs from this research perspective was productive. The results are relevant and add innovative knowledge for various reasons: (1) there are few studies involving the direct participation of GIOs like in this case and we need to hear more from them, jointly with producers and consumers; (2) qualitative research is costly and highly contextual, it tends to focus on one GI product or compare a limited number of them and this study provided a broad understanding of almost an entire regional GIs scheme; and (3) in this article I conclude reflecting on a posthuman perspective to frame GI labels in future research, which will be specially relevant to environmental issues; the non-anthropocentric view would see GIs as nodes of assemblages linking organisations, producers and policymakers, but also other than human agents; physical elements, orography, weather conditions, animal and plant varieties, weather conditions, and many others interact with and affect GI projects along with administrative paperwork or commercial storytelling.

Focusing on the Catalan context, this research helps to find out about how GIOs see GIs role as contributing to agriculture and farming in rural areas. RQ1 was straightforward addressing this matter. The GIOs understand themselves as certifying and promoting mechanisms at the service of GI producers and consumers. They stress two main roles of GIs: to certify the quality of the products and to promote them under the labels. However, and despite the limited available resources that they pointed out, they brought to light other lesser-known GIs facets. They commented on many cultural and social activities they carry out, from culinary to educational, from tourist events to popular festivities. Overall, they recognised GIs role beyond being protective figures or marketing tools in a competitive scenario.

Catalan GI scheme show a great diversity despite being in a relatively small region within the EU. GIs views varied depending on the products, the history of each project and the approach and experiences at each place and even the character of the participants. This urges us to be cautious not to launch straight forward affirmations about the homogeneous regional behaviour of GIs, whether they are in northern or southern regions. RQ2 inquired about the values to overcome difficulties and contribute to rural development. In the Catalan case, the GIOs state that GI’s production is committed to rural communities, and they argue a positive impact to achieve stronger ruralities. In this respect, they

mentioned the GIs’ agency in valorising agrifood products and to root people in the countryside, to balance food and culinary heritage with innovation and modernisation, to keep their commitment with environments and landscapes and to contribute to cultural life in villages and towns. The conversations give clues that GIs can be understood as a sort of common goods—as other authors have noted and are commented in previous sections—, beyond their role as adding value to production in a global market scenario.

The conversation with GIOs also intended to identify what difficulties and problems are relevant for GIs activities. Not everything is seen in an optimistic light, the picture is usually more complex. RQ3 aimed them to articulate these challenges and how they can be overcome. The economic element lies at the core of their concerns here, and they experience first-hand the struggles that the primary sector is facing in the current context. This results in a list of issues including a competitive market, low prices, global trade, a lack of generational renewal and problems related to climate change and more extreme weather.

The administration and policymakers have an unavoidable role here since GI schemes require control but also support, not only for the activity of each organisation, but of the general network to work properly. In achieving the objectives and overcoming the challenges, the policymakers must better listen to and include rural communities, as well as consider organizational perspectives that cannot be ignored. This issue was connected with the future and forthcoming action. RQ4 did not produce a black or white perspective either. There are many nuances and grey areas, opportunities but huge challenges. The primary sector is undergoing a deep crisis in Catalonia—like in other EU regions—and farmers are increasingly participating in protests and campaigning for a tangible sustainable activity. Overall, they foresee an uncertain future, but they are not giving up in their commitments because farming is not only a profession but also a way of understanding life. In this scenario, GIs schemes are seen as a suitable tool to increase and circulate value; the key point noted here was to commit to higher quality, at the same time as calling for decisive supporting policies from governments at regional, national and European levels.

Obviously, the study has limitations, given that it focused on arguments and stories by the people working for the GI projects. Their outstanding degree of participation and involvement in the interviews was an indicator of transparency and public commitment. Also, the outputs are not easily extrapolated to other contexts, but surely resemble some of them. Although interpretative research always has limitations, systematic approaches are crucial in our aims to understand sensemaking processes and complexities at an organizational level.

A final note is opportune; we should not simplify GIs’ roles in rural life. We must not assess them as isolated schemes operating in a region. One interesting perspective here is to see GI products as agents in assembled networks affecting human and other than human beings, intertwined with environments and technologies, combining tradition and modernisation. We need more inclusive approaches to GIs and to talk about their challenges with the people managing them. This is a way to find out how they can improve rural resilience. They are contributing to rural imaginaries and futures along with many agents affecting a very complex scenario, from the producers to other species roaming among the crops, from policymakers in a distant capital city to the older generation telling of how things had always been done, from company dealers in globalised supply chains to their neighbours purchasing vegetables in the local village market. Also, they interact not only with material but also with immaterial heritage, with aspects connected to memory and identities. In this piece I aimed to share what I learned on the Catalan GIs and with their organisations. Surely, one important lesson was that we need to avoid too simple approaches to their realities and that a way to better understand GIs’ complexities is to leave the office and go and talk to the people, step in the fields and observe first hand.

Declaration of AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the author used Atlas.ti (v 25) in order to get automatic transcription of the interviews. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the quotations used in the text and takes full responsibility of the published article.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Enric Castelló: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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Data availability

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