

Da Qualidade à Inclusão: Repensando Estratégias de Valorização de Méis Locais em Contextos Territoriais Vulneráveis

From Quality to Inclusion: Rethinking Valorization Strategies for Local Honey Products in Territorial Contexts of Vulnerability

Silvia Scaramuzzi

University of Florence, Italy (It)

Mikael Oliveira Linder

CIRAD, France (Fr) & ICIPE, Kenya (Ke)

Arilson Favareto

University of São Paulo (USP) & Federal University of ABC (UFABC), Brazil (Br)

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Resumo: O estudo analisa em que medida estratégias de valorização de recursos bioculturais contribuem para o desenvolvimento territorial inclusivo. Com base na sociologia econômica e na abordagem territorial, realiza-se uma análise comparativa de três casos no setor de mel: Mel de Aroeira do Norte de Minas (Brasil), Mau Forest Honey (Quênia) e Mukhuri Honey (Geórgia). Os resultados indicam que estratégias centradas no produto, em contextos de alta vulnerabilidade, tendem a reproduzir desigualdades, devido a padrões restritivos, dominância de intermediários e fraco apoio institucional. Em contraste, abordagens territoriais que mobilizam recursos bioculturais e promovem aprendizagem coletiva podem ampliar a inclusão, desde que a governança reequilibre o poder e fortaleça capacidades locais. A ausência de instituições robustas limita os impactos positivos. Conclui-se que superar o trade-off entre inovação e escala requer uma abordagem sistêmica integrando dimensões produtivas, institucionais e territoriais

Palavras-chave: produtos locais; inclusão produtiva; governança, assimetrias de poder; desenvolvimento territorial.

Abstract: This study examines the extent to which biocultural resource valorization strategies contribute to inclusive territorial development. Drawing on economic sociology and territorial approaches, it conducts a comparative analysis of three honey cases: Aroeira Honey (Brazil), Mau Forest Honey (Kenya), and Mukhuri Honey (Georgia). Findings show that product-centered strategies in highly vulnerable contexts tend to reproduce inequalities due to restrictive standards, intermediary dominance, and weak institutional support. In contrast, territorial approaches mobilizing biocultural resources and fostering collective learning can enhance inclusion, provided governance rebalances power and strengthens local capacities. Across cases, weak institutions limit positive outcomes. The study concludes that overcoming the innovation-scale trade-off requires a systemic approach integrating productive, institutional, and territorial dimensions.

Keywords: local products; productive inclusion; governance; power asymmetries; territorial development.

1. Introduction

Approaches to the valorization of localized products range from product-oriented instruments to territorially grounded strategies based on biocultural heritage. Their capacity to promote inclusive development, however, varies widely according to institutional environments, governance arrangements and territorial dynamics. Drawing on foundational and contemporary literature in economic sociology and territorial development, this paper conceives localized products not merely as quality-labelled goods but as socio-biocultural constructions embedded in historically rooted institutions and asymmetric power relations.

The study employs a comparative case analysis of three honey valorization initiatives in three different continents and countries: Mel de Aroeira do Norte de Minas (Brazil), Mau Forest

Honey (Kenya), and Mukhuri Honey (Georgia). These cases were selected because they operate in developing and transition economies marked by differentiated governance models, vulnerability profiles and institutional capacities.

This paper aims to critically assess whether and under what conditions valorization strategies for local honey products translate into inclusive development outcomes.

2. The theoretical background

The valorization of localized products has been conceptualized through a predominantly product-oriented lens, centered on quality differentiation mechanisms such as geographical indications and collective marks. Belletti and Marescotti (2021) demonstrate that these instruments can activate virtuous valorization circles linking territorial resources, collective strategies, and market remuneration, provided that governance arrangements are inclusive and the institutional environment is sufficiently robust.

However, product-centered approaches produce highly uneven outcomes in contexts of structural vulnerability. Berdegué et al. (2020) identify a set of recurrent institutional weaknesses in rural territorial development: coordination failures across governance levels, the persistence of sectoral conceptions of rurality, and the difficulty of generating arrangements that balance bottom-up and top-down dynamics. These structural bottlenecks call for an analytical shift from procedural to systemic frameworks.

In this direction, Scaramuzzi et al. (2023) propose a holistic model centered on biocultural heritage valorization, understood as the interconnected complex of local knowledge, biological diversity, and cultural practices, and identify five critical processes for inclusive territorial development, foregrounding actors' empowerment, multi-level governance, and identity recognition as indispensable dimensions.

The concept of productive inclusion completes the framework. Vahdat et al. (2023) show that valorization initiatives face a persistent innovation-scale trade-off: strategies that generate quality innovation tend toward selective inclusion, while broader-scale approaches retain low institutional quality. This tension is especially acute in Global South contexts, where weak institutional environments systematically constrain the participation of the most vulnerable producers. Overcoming it requires integrating productive, institutional, and territorial dimensions within a systemic approach, which is precisely the analytical lens this paper adopts.

3. Methodology

This study draws on three case studies (Simons, 2020) adopting product-based strategies to promote traditional honeys: Aroeira honey from Northern Minas Gerais (Brazil), Mau Forest honey (Kenya), and Mukhuri honey (Georgia). These cases were selected based on several factors that support comparability, including data availability, product type, the quality scheme adopted (GI, either registered or in the process of registration), and the fact that the regions are characterized by differentiated governance models, vulnerability profiles and institutional capacities. The analytical dimensions were derived from the theoretical framework described. Scientific and grey literature served as preliminary data sources for the three cases, followed by a field analysis for each case study (Wang et al. 2017; Patton 2002), with a systemic, multistakeholder approach. Purposive snowball sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015; Creswell et al., 2011) guided participant recruitment, with data collection proceeding until saturation was reached. These data were triangulated (Halcomb and Andrew, 2005) and subsequently analyzed according to the predefined analytical dimensions in order to identify convergences, divergences, and gaps.

Tab. 1 - In-depth interviews with key informants per typology and case study

Interviewees typology	Mel de Aroeira	Mau Forest Honey	Mukhuri Honey
Honey Producers', Cooperatives and Associations	22	30	21
Marketing sector	3	22	1
National Regional and local Public authorities	2	1	5
GI authorities	2	1	1
NGOs		1	
Research Institutions		1	2
International Institutions	1		2

4. Results

The results for the three cases are presented below based according to the analytical dimensions drawn from the literature on territorial development and GIs, which are relevant to productive inclusion and aligned with the scope of this study:

	Aroeira Honey N. Minas Gerais (Brazil)	Mau Forest Honey (Kenya)	Mukhuri Honey (Georgia)
Dimension	GI registered 2022. Semi-arid region, low HDI, limited infrastructure, predominantly family-based beekeeping.	GI not yet registered (no sui generis law). Vast mountainous area, low HDI, predominantly family beekeeping.	GI registered 2021. Small village, geographic isolation, family-based unregistered beekeeping operations.

	Aroeira Honey N. Minas Gerais (Brazil)	Mau Forest Honey (Kenya)	Mukhuri Honey (Georgia)
Key Actors & Institutional Support	~2,000 beekeepers; 1 cooperative (40 GI members); 36 associations. Support: INPI, WIPO, CODEVASF, SEBRAE.	Marginalized Ogiek indigenous communities. 1 organization. Support: ICIPE, CIRAD, GI Support Fund/AFD.	Dozens of small, unregistered family beekeepers 2 small cooperatives; CMO 'Mukhuri Cluster' (est. Oct. 2023). Support: UNIDO.
Governance & Power Asymmetries	Asymmetric governance: cooperative dominates regulatory council. Most beekeepers lack GI/market capacity.	Governance under construction. Gender-based exclusion persists. Risk of capture by stronger actors.	Nascent governance (CMO 2023). Strong gender asymmetry: women in production, excluded from decisions.
Biocultural Heritage	Strong link: product–native ecosystem. GI may reinforce conservation. Threatened by eucalyptus forestry.	Deep link: honey–ecosystem–indigenous traditions. Conservation potential. Threatened by cash-crop plantations.	Endemic Megrelian Grey bee; ancient sacred tradition. Relevant historical heritage. GI/Cluster may reinforce conservation incentives.
Market Integration	Only cooperative holds formal market license. Most rely on informal chains or intermediaries with high margins.	Mainly informal short chains. Intermediaries capture high margins. No GI-differentiated channel yet, but the project aims to build fair market access.	Predominantly direct informal sales. No packaging/labeling. Short value chain. Only 1 firm uses GI mark. Equipment underutilized.
GI & Productive Inclusion: Potential & Limits	High potential if: intermediary capture reduced, governance reformed, capabilities built. Recency limits assessment.	High potential as inclusion tool for indigenous and forest communities. Ex ante phase: institutional design is still open. reinforcement of capabilities, and inclusion outcomes are expected	High potential via basket-of-products strategy (tourism, GI). Contingent on: lab access, packaging, collective action. UNIDO cluster development approach provides structured governance framework. Explicit women's empowerment and inclusive development components

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The three cases share a common baseline of structural vulnerability and near-total exclusion of small-scale producers from high-value markets, despite differing in the stage of GI development and governance arrangements. Brazil presents a recently registered but weakly managed GI, Kenya remains in a pre-registration phase, and Georgia has a registered but still largely non-operational GI.

Across all cases, governance emerges as the key determinant of inclusion outcomes. Persistent power asymmetries, particularly gendered ones, and the risk of intermediary or elite capture significantly limit the benefits of GI valorization. Although biocultural heritage constitutes an important territorial asset, it remains both insufficiently leveraged and increasingly under pressure.

Overall, GIs display a high but conditional potential for productive inclusion. Their effectiveness depends on the rebalancing of governance arrangements, the strengthening of local capabilities, the reduction of intermediary dominance, and the integration of broader territorial strategies. In the absence of these conditions, product-based approaches tend to reproduce existing inequalities, whereas more systemic and territorially embedded strategies offer greater, though still contingent, inclusion potential.

The Georgian case highlights the potential of a “basket of goods and services” strategy to enhance inclusiveness compared to product-centered approaches, which often concentrate benefits among larger producers. Although still at an early stage, this approach may help mitigate exclusion dynamics, provided that governance ensures effective representation and coordination. The cluster initiative explicitly pursues this objective, but its implementation remains constrained by limited financial resources.

From a comparative perspective, the cases can be positioned along a continuum of inclusiveness shaped by governance configurations, strategic orientation, and the timing of institutional adjustments. Georgia appears relatively more advanced, albeit still incomplete; Kenya occupies an intermediate and evolving position, where persistent gender gaps coexist with efforts to address asymmetries already in the pre-registration phase. By contrast, Brazil reflects more entrenched governance asymmetries, as inclusion concerns emerged only after GI registration and remain only partially addressed, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities.

In conclusion, the analysis provides a qualified assessment of the conditions under which valorization strategies translate into inclusive development outcomes. Inclusiveness does not arise automatically from GI processes but depends on specific institutional and organizational conditions, including representative governance, the capacity to address structural asymmetries, and the adoption of broader strategic approaches. The comparison also indicates that timing matters: addressing inclusion constraints early is more effective than ex-post corrections. While a structural tension between scaling and inclusion persists, the cases suggest that it can be at least partially managed through appropriate governance design and sustained policy support.

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