

Food producing cooperatives in the Bekaa Valley: A gateway of culture foods into Lebanon's urban cities

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Lebanon is a small country known for its rich food diversity. Despite having no official data, it is expected that internal migration of citizens contributed to the emphasis of heritage foods into urban cities. Mouneh is a group of culture foods historically consumed following the preservation of seasonal agricultural produce for extended shelf-life. Today mouneh is a common staple in Lebanon's culinary ingredients. Although having a strong competition from commercial uncontrolled industries, a group of specific producers, cooperatives, may hold the potential to preserve this heritage and even contribute to food security. Mouneh-producing cooperatives, mostly located at proximity to raw material resources as in the Bekaa valley, are mostly dependent on surrounding farmers' supply whereas are strongly linked to the urban market of the capital Beirut. Primary figures show that over half of turnover originate from urban markets for 60% of cooperatives in the Bekaa. Further data highlight important urban trade activities facilitated by proximity and with scalable potential due to external support availability of international trade routes.

Keywords – mouneh foods, cooperatives, Lebanon, Bekaa valley

INTRODUCTION

The reputation of the Lebanese cuisine at a global level indicates the culinary richness of this small Mediterranean country. Of the latter, a group of preserved foods called "mouneh" play a major component. Mouneh may be understood as the transformation of agricultural seasonal produce into shelf-stable preserves by using processes as drying, fermentation, concentration and pickling (Massaad, 2017). Historically, mouneh was produced at the level of households as an attempt for food and nutritional security during off-season, using fresh produce from the vicinity. Today, the change in lifestyle, economic reconstruction, technology and internal migration have reduced the production of household mouneh and shifted into market dispatch. Many food manufacturers and traders have accordingly capitalized on that opportunity. However, commercial production and trade remain with no official control or norms which raises concern of absent artisanal quality, use of foreign raw material, uncontrolled ingredients and price gouging. Given the recent economic setback which peaked by October 2019 in Lebanon, a mostly import-dependent country, many traders have been facing restrictions in importing goods. This is why a return to traditional stocking of pantry foods especially mouneh is being called for. A specific type of local artisanal producers, cooperatives, may thus hold the potential to protect food heritage while contributing to urban food security.

The main objective of this article is to investigate the link of rural artisanal cooperatives producing mouneh foods with the major urban market of Beirut and their potential role in preserving heritage while taking part in urban food security.

METHODS

Selection of cooperatives

40 cooperatives producing mouneh located within the Bekaa valley were identified from the official list of the Directorate General of Cooperatives at the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture. The list was next refined, through phone contact, to verify operational cooperatives which are actively producing and trading end-products. The Bekaa valley was selected due to its territorial conditions as: being a major agricultural producer, significant surface area, having distinct geo-climatic conditions, cultural presence and transportation infrastructure.

Data collection and analysis

A survey questionnaire was then developed to investigate operations, market presence and affiliations in terms of sources of raw material and turnovers and was filled with the cooperatives via in-person interviews. Results were analyzed mainly qualitatively and on a lesser note quantitatively using basic statistical tools, with focus on the type and extent of market dependency.

RESULTS

Mouneh: a carrier of gastronomic culture

Literature reflect the correlation of mouneh with heritage. Common use of the word "Baladi" is interchangeable with the word "traditional" (Challita, 2010) and links with village life (Thana Abu Ghyda et al., 2007), demonstrates a strong statement for mouneh as a carrier of local culture. The customary consumption of mouneh foods indicates a maintained transfer of culinary habit across generations with time. Although the culture of mouneh exists across Lebanon and even overlaying some similarities with neighboring Levant countries, the Bekaa valley still presents its own production and trade influence.

The Bekaa Valley as a Leading Territory in Lebanon

Reasons behind considering the mostly rural Bekaa Valley as an efficient production and trade territory resides in an accumulation of different components. The Bekaa valley, which covers 38% of the country's surface area, is characterized by lower precipitation and humidity than the remainder of the country due to being situated between Lebanon's two mountain ranges, as well as with a unique mosaic soil (Darwish, 2013) and relatively rich water sources. The valley is even characterized by a variety of microclimates owed to its diverse topography, thus resulting in a characterizable variety of agricultural products. Indeed, the Bekaa valley holds the main surface dedicated for the production of cereals and pulses (57%), vegetables (57%), fruit trees (36%), livestock as sheep (38%), goats (29%), cattle (26%) and dairy (44%) (IDAL, 2018). Although Lebanon is relatively small, the locality of the Bekaa plain at the edge of the country puts it at proximity to important markets and borders. These include the main urban market in Beirut and those linked to neighboring countries made

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accessible by the Beirut-Chtaura-Damascus international roadway, a main land-based transportation and trade route in the territory.

Status of Mouneh-producing Cooperatives

The Bekaa valley is noted to host 23% of all cooperatives found in Lebanon. Cooperatives engaged in the production of *mouneh* foods are mostly small scale with an average of less than 20 members and a minimum of 1 up to 15 tons of annual (seasonal) production. Such types of cooperatives are also distinguished by having centralized production centers equipped with needed tools and infrastructure, although with varying extent depending on external sources of support. Main results show that a significant portion of *mouneh*-producing cooperatives rely on urban markets for trade sales. 60% of interviewed cooperatives reported that over half of their turnover originate from the urban market of the capital Beirut, out of which half reached up to three quarters of urban turnover. Only 35% of interviewed cooperatives reported a weak link with the urban market reflected in sales of 30% or less. On another note, over 80% of results reported a dependency on local sources of raw material whereby a minimum of 80% of originates from surrounding farmers within the district level (Figure 1). Further trade indicators show that only 28% of cooperatives have appropriate means of transportation while 65% actively participate in urban promotional exhibitions.

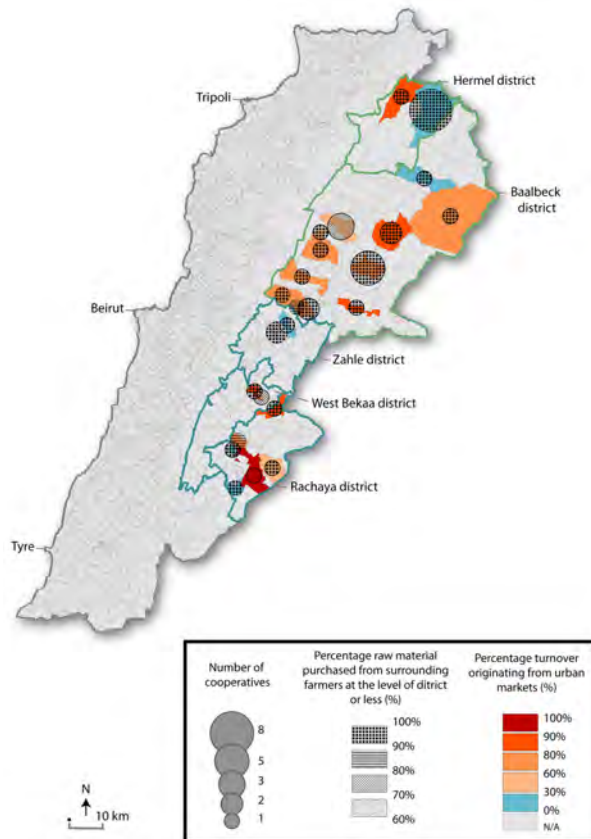


Figure 1: Spatial distribution of food cooperatives in the Bekaa valley, Lebanon (Baalbeck-Hermel governorate in green and Bekaa governorate in Blue) coupled with the percentage of raw material originating from surrounding farmers at the district level, and the percentage turnover originating from the urban market of the capital Beirut. Source: Jalkh R., 2020, ART-DEV, UM3

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Bekaa valley's mostly agricultural setting and workforce is reflected not only on productive figures but on social aspects evident by having "almost every resident a farmer" (Bou-Antoun, 2014). Compared to the country's 5% agricultural GDP (Haydamous and El Hajj, 2016), its rural counterparts are estimated to reach 80% GDP in areas as Northern Bekaa (FAO). Its

conditions may be argued to affect the quality of raw material and processes for end-products. The reputation of *mouneh* cooperatives is highly linked with the production of traditional foods (ILO, 2018) mainly due to their artisanal nature which corresponds to historical practices. *Mouneh*'s current uses in urban environments also add emphasis of how internal migrations, could have amplified the input of such practices into cities. When considering food as a carrier of culture, it becomes evident how cooperatives become protectors of heritage. Additionally, cooperatives in Lebanon are generally territorial actors having a geographical activity delimited within the borders of towns or municipalities. Figures show a dependency on local sources of raw material from surrounding farmers but conversely reflect a strong link on urban markets for trade. Cooperatives in Lebanon today are being supported by external donors due to their potential for job creation, enhanced livelihoods and overall development. Hence, by having a largely agricultural territory with sufficient evidence of differentiation, proximity and trade routes to urban market coupled with conglomeration of local artisanal cooperatives, one can assume a potential for protection of culinary heritage and possible scalable contribution to food security if needed.

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