

Markets in Tradition

Traditional Agricultural Communities in Italy and the Impact of GMOs

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Abstract

This paper will examine the relationship between traditional agricultural communities, regional development, and the uptake of agricultural biotechnologies, through an examination of Italian traditional agriculture in the context of attempts to introduce genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to the agricultural market. Of critical interest to this paper will be the cultural and economic significance of Italian traditional agricultural knowledge and national cultural identity with respect to farming practices, organic trade, and resistance to GM. This paper considers the interaction in Italy between traditional agriculture and GMOs (particularly in the context of international trade and intellectual property protection), and examines the political and cultural factors that are perhaps limiting the commercial and agricultural potential of biotechnology in Italy, but at the same time facilitating growth in regional and local economies, and effective competition in an international market.

Introduction

Genetic engineering and genetically modified (GM) food in particular has provoked strenuous debate and has attracted a great deal of concern and suspicion from the general public, particularly anxiety over possible environmental damage and irreversible harm to organic farming initiatives. On the technological and social promises of GM, many have lauded the potential role of genetic engineering in achieving food and agricultural security in the developing world, although this has been tempered by concerns over access to that technology being limited by intellectual property monopolies.

Research on the entry of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into the agricultural marketplace has largely emphasised questions of consumer confidence and trust, product liability, and the market. However, the relationship between GMOs, free trade, and questions of culture and traditional knowledge, has received less consistent attention. In particular, in the context of current international discussions towards the recognition, identification, and protection of traditional knowledge, the relationship between culture and technology must be considered more closely.

This paper will examine the relationship between traditional agricultural communities, regional development, and the uptake of agricultural biotechnologies, through an examination of Italian traditional agricultural communities in a “knowledge economy.” In particular, the significance of cultural diversity and knowledge diversity to innovation in Italy and international competitiveness, will be examined as a potential motivation for

alternative strategies for protection, commercialisation, and revitalisation of traditional agricultural communities in Italy. Italy presents a complex and critical focus for the current international debate over traditional knowledge protection and access to knowledge, the stimulation and generation of innovation, international competitiveness, and debates concerning the knowledge society more broadly.

In particular, as will be discussed in more detail:

1. Response to GMOs

Italy is one of several countries criticised for its laws pertaining to the production of GMOs, described as protectionism and illegitimate restrictions upon the free trade of goods.

2. Political Influence

Italy is significant as a portal to the Northern African countries, and increasingly for Eastern Europe (particularly relevant in the context of increased activity towards accession to the European Union throughout countries in Eastern Europe). Italy's presence is relevant from both economic and political perspectives, whereby legal and policy developments in Italy are likely to have relevant impacts on such countries. Furthermore, developments in Italy will be significant to debates concerning food security and the confidence in GM technology and products in the abovementioned regions and elsewhere in the world.

3. Traditional Agricultural Communities and Cultural Diversity

The nature of traditional agricultural knowledge and traditional agricultural communities is the critical focal point of this paper and arguably for these

issues. Indeed, the national cultural identity with respect to regional cultural diversity and traditional farming practices, organic trade, and resistance to GM, provides significant insight for other regions, particularly Eastern Europe (in the context of accession to the EU).

4. International Competitiveness in the Global Knowledge Economy

Increasingly, as discussed, this debate is taking place not only within the agenda of international and free trade, but also from the perspectives of cultural diversity and national integrity within an expanding Europe and throughout the international knowledge economy.

Italy and Traditional Agriculture

Traditional agricultural methods and organic means of production have emerged as genuine commercial alternatives to GM industries, presenting significant opportunities to facilitate regional and local development in the context of exploiting real advantages for national economies through international trade. It is critical at this time for governments to understand how to enhance cultural and economic diversity through regional development, secure national branding of unique outputs, and recognise legitimate competitive advantages in a global economy. As will be argued in this paper, traditional agricultural knowledge, methods, and production present such genuine advantages to be understood, preserved, and utilised. Indeed, the critical cultural, and arguably commercial, value of strong recognition and protection of traditional knowledge, diversity in the development of knowledge, and the promotion of local and regional capacity through the innovation to be

found within traditional communities, must be examined for the potential to consolidate the competitive position of Italy within an international market of agricultural biotechnologies and products. In particular, the competition from organic products must be acknowledged, not only in the domestic market but also in the uptake of agricultural biotechnologies, where entry of the latter may be seen to compromise organic products as otherwise unique entry points in the global market.

The Important Case of Italy

As introduced earlier, Italy presents a complex and critical nexus of issues in the current international debates over traditional knowledge, innovation, and international competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. The critical points of interaction in the unique case presented by Italian agriculture and legislative responses demonstrate a significant opportunity to address these questions, and to understand and encourage regional innovation and capacity-building through the recognition and awareness of diversity in methods of innovation and the development of knowledge (including traditional methods) as distinct from registering innovation simply through diversity in products.

1. The Response to GMOs

First, Italy is currently one of several countries cited by the United States, in disputes to the World Trade Organization (WTO), for what is claimed to be illegitimate prohibition of the import of GMOs for use in primary agricultural production or as ingredients in foods. In particular,

Italy has been criticised for protectionism and illegitimate restrictions upon the free trade of goods, criticisms directly related to the stimulation and protection of traditional agricultural method and culture.

2. Policy and Legal Influence

Secondly, Italy has long been recognised as a portal to Northern African countries and increasingly for Eastern Europe, from both economic and political perspectives, making it legitimate to hypothesise that legal and policy developments in Italy will have relevant impacts on such countries. Furthermore, developments in Italy will be significant to debates concerning food security and the confidence in GM technology and products in the abovementioned regions and elsewhere in the world.

3. Traditional Agricultural Communities and Cultural Diversity

Thirdly, and of critical interest to the present discussion, is the cultural and economic significance of Italian traditional agricultural knowledge and national cultural identity with respect to farming practices, organic trade, and resistance to GM. Current discussions of the protection of traditional knowledge being undertaken within the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (IGC) continue to construct these concerns as questions for intellectual property laws. Broadly speaking, intellectual property laws protect, on the one hand, those knowledge goods that represent the commercial investment of research and development (such as

patents, trade secrets, designs, and copyright) and on the other hand, those linked to product differentiation and branding (such as trade marks and geographical indications). To render the concerns of traditional agricultural communities within the parameters defined by intellectual property laws introduces tensions between national and regional identities (whereby geographical indications become “national” property as distinct from local or traditional “community” assets) as well as between knowledge as an information product, and knowledge as integral to cultural diversity and identity.

4. International Competitiveness in a Global Knowledge Economy

Finally, the protection and stimulation of traditional knowledge in agriculture (and in other industries and regional communities) may be of particular relevance to the achievement of international competitiveness in an increasingly globalised market. The critical cultural and indeed commercial value of strong recognition of traditional knowledge, diversity in the development of knowledge, and promotion of local and regional capacity through the innovation to be found within traditional communities, must be examined for the potential to consolidate the competitive position of Italy within an international market.

Increasingly, competitiveness on an international scale may come to rely upon the integrity of products that may be offered, and indeed a realisation of national identity and “branding” through adequate protection and promotion of traditional knowledge. In particular, such measures are likely to secure unique entry points in the global market,

while stimulating community and cultural development and well-being, thus ensuring innovative responses to competition from countries such as China and India.

While this has been recognised previously in the context of “national products” and the application of geographical indications, the relevance of traditional knowledge and the integrity and development of local and traditional communities is not as well understood.

In the case of agricultural communities, traditional agricultural knowledge presents unique cultural and national value. Organic and traditional agriculture represent significant opportunities for Italy to achieve and strengthen access to the international market and compete strongly with genetically modified foods in the global forum. That is, branding of organic and traditional agriculture may indeed overcome the “physical” and financial obstacles to market access and ensure the sustainable development of traditional agriculture within an international trading environment.

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of the interaction in Italy between traditional agriculture and intellectual property protection (particularly in the context of international trade) presents a unique opportunity to characterise the impact of socio-cultural dimensions on regional economy and trade, in addition to the predominant perspectives upon consumer confidence and product identity. Furthermore, an understanding of the relationship between cultural identity

and the unique branding of traditional knowledge will generate important insight into harnessing the genuine competitive advantages in the agricultural market offered by traditional agricultural production.