

AROMATIC, MEDICINAL, AND LOCAL HERBS: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF NETWORKS

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1. PURPOSE

The purpose of the communication is to present some research results on the sector of aromatic and medicinal herbs located in different regions of the Portuguese territory. The focus of the presentation is the role of local development associations and networks in the development of the sector. Aromatic and medicinal plants are very important in the Mediterranean diet. Their presence in gourmet food and the recipes of well-known chefs gave an important impulse in the prestige and, therefore, demand of the product. The cultivation of aromatic and medicinal herbs has economic, social, and environmental impacts on the territory. Besides the creation of employment and the possibility of an, principal or complementary, income source, this production provides the improvement of biodiversity and the occupation of rural areas. They are mostly cultivated in small and very small farms, both in developing and developed countries (Kwankhao & Indaratna, 2020; Matthews & Jack, 201; Schunko, et al, 2019; Unati et al, 2016; Yamoah et al, 2014). This characteristic presents many challenges in different dimensions of business development through the value chain, namely commercialization. That is why the connection and the establishment of partnerships with other actors, such as local development associations, and other producers, have an important role, since they provide the scale and critical resources towards the success of this initiatives. The case study selected, EPAM, provides the empirical setting to explore this sector regarding the role of networks. With these goals in mind, the presentation is structured in through the following topics: after the revision of literature, and the design of a conceptual framework, the communication presents the methodological options, and the results. The presentation finishes with the identification of limitations of the research and concluding remarks.

2. DESIGN/ METHODOLOGY/ APPROACH

This is a case study approach with an explorative and quantitative nature. It is focused on a network of producers of aromatic and medicinal herbs, organized under the EPAM project (Entrepreneurship in the value chain of medicinal and aromatic plants (acronym of the project in Portuguese Empreender na Fileira das PAM em Portugal). The main goal of the project is to foster tools to support the development of the businesses along the aromatic and medicinal herbs value-chain.

The research uses primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through online questionnaire to the producers of aromatic and medicinal herbs located in different regions of the Portuguese territory. The questionnaire asked the producers to assess their participation on the EPAM network for their activities, using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from not important to highly important. It also asked for an assessment of the importance of relationships with a variety of organization at different scales to access

resources relevant for the development of their businesses. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail to all active EPAM producers (N=136). A total of 34 valid responses were obtained, corresponding to a 25% response rate. Secondary data was collected to characterize the territories where the farms are located, resorting to INE-Statistics Portugal Portal. Statistical procedures of univariate and bivariate analysis are used.

3. FINDINGS

The results confirm the importance of networks for the development of these businesses, namely with local development associations. However, it is possible to identify some diversity in the assessment of the role of those networks. The findings might present a useful tool in the design of public policies focused on rural development.

4. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

The limitations of the research are mainly related with the difficulty of gathering primary data by using online questionnaires.

5. ORIGINALITY

There are research gaps in the sector of aromatic and medicinal herbs in the case of developed countries. Therefore, the originality of the communication is related with the novelty of the sector in the academic debate.

6. REFERENCES

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