DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR IDENTIFYING CERTIFICATION POTENTIAL FOR A GRAZING QUALITY LABEL IN ROMANIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract
In Romania, pasture-based livestock systems are ecologically valuable but often economically under-recognized, creating interest in voluntary certification approaches that could improve market visibility and trust. This paper develops and reports a methodological framework for identifying certification potential and selecting a benchmark European model for a future grazing quality label in Romania. A participatory comparative selection approach was applied, combining a desk-based mapping of pasture-related certification schemes with a structured brainstorming process organized through a funnel logic. First, more than 50 relevant European schemes were identified using scientific literature, regulatory sources, and official documentation from certification bodies and institutional specification databases. Second, three iterative brainstorming sessions were conducted to progressively narrow the option set: (i) landscape mapping and shared familiarization; (ii) prioritization through structured proposals leading to a shortlist of 12 schemes; and (iii) final comparative evaluation of four finalists using explicit feasibility- and credibility-oriented criteria (e.g., grazing-day requirements, traceability and documentation, monitoring/enforcement mechanisms, inclusiveness for small farms, and expected fit with Romanian conditions). The funnel-based process (50+ - 12 - 4 - 1) resulted in the selection of ProWeideland (Germany) as the benchmark model due to its clear technical specifications, transparent governance and verification structure, and perceived adaptability across farm sizes, alongside strong consumer-facing communication features. The proposed framework offers a transparent and reproducible pathway for early-stage certification design and provides a defensible reference point for subsequent adaptation work in Romania.

Keywords: Grazing-based certification, structured brainstorming, funnel selection method, benchmark label selection, certification benchmarking
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INTRODUCTION

In Romania, pasture-based livestock systems remain an important component of rural landscapes, particularly in regions characterized by forested mountains, biodiverse grasslands, and traditional livestock practices. However, these systems are often economically under-recognized, and the development of credible market instruments that can translate grazing practices into clear, verifiable recognition remains a challenge (Khan et al., 2024).

Recent work highlights innovation gaps and barriers affecting sustainable High Nature Value grasslands in Romania, reinforcing the need for structured, context-sensitive approaches when designing grazing-related certification tools (Jitea et al., 2021).

One pragmatic approach in early-stage certification design is to begin with a systematic scan of existing European schemes that already operationalize pasture-related requirements and to select a robust benchmark model that can later be adapted to local conditions. Such a comparative step is particularly relevant when the landscape of available certifications is highly heterogeneous in governance structures, technical thresholds, traceability requirements, and feasibility across farm types. Participatory selection processes can support transparent convergence and strengthen the legitimacy of early design choices (Ammirato et al., 2021; Hubeau et al., 2017).

This paper reports one methodological component of a broader research programme on grazing certification in Romania: the comparative identification and selection of a benchmark European label using structured brainstorming and a funnel-based convergence logic. The specific objectives are to: (i) map pasture-related certification schemes relevant to grazing-based production, (ii) apply a structured brainstorming process to shortlist and comparatively evaluate candidate schemes using explicit feasibility- and credibility-

oriented criteria, and (iii) select a single benchmark model to serve as a reference point for subsequent adaptation work in the Romanian context. (Osborn, 1953).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study reports a participatory comparative selection step within a broader research programme on designing a voluntary grazing-based certification for Romania. The methodological core consisted of structured brainstorming to support collective mapping and evaluation of heterogeneous certification schemes (Osborn, 1953), combined with a funnel-based convergence logic to ensure transparent narrowing from broad exploration to a defensible benchmark choice (Ammirato et al., 2021).

An initial desk-based mapping was conducted to identify pasture-related quality schemes active across Europe. Candidate schemes were compiled from peer-reviewed literature, relevant regulatory frameworks, and official documentation published by certification bodies, complemented by institutional databases containing product specifications (e.g., GI specifications). This stage resulted in a pool of more than 50 potentially relevant schemes for comparative screening.

The mapping outputs were synthesised through three iterative brainstorming sessions. First, a landscape mapping session established a shared overview of scheme types, governance structures and technical requirements, with work organised by European macro-regions to support territorial coverage and comparability across institutional contexts (Hubeau et al., 2017). Second, a prioritisation session applied a structured proposal format in which each researcher presented three candidate schemes (primary, backup, and a creative alternative). Through facilitated discussion, the group converged on a shortlist of twelve schemes considered potentially adaptable to Romanian conditions. Third, a final comparative evaluation session examined **four** finalist schemes in depth using explicit feasibility- and credibility-oriented criteria, including minimum grazing-day requirements, traceability and documentation procedures, robustness of monitoring/enforcement, inclusiveness for small farms, and expected fit with Romania's ecological diversity and institutional context (de Koning, 2023). A structured voting procedure was then used to select a single benchmark scheme.

Across sessions, the process followed a funnel logic to ensure transparent convergence from broad exploration to a defensible selection: 50+ identified schemes were reduced to 12 shortlisted candidates, then to four finalists, and finally to one selected benchmark**.** The selected benchmark was the German ProWeideland certification, chosen for its clear technical specifications (including a minimum grazing-days requirement), transparent institutional structure for monitoring and enforcement, and perceived adaptability across different farm sizes; the scheme's consumer-facing communication features were also considered an asset for market visibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results: funnel-based progression and benchmark selection

The structured brainstorming process produced a transparent funnel-style reduction from a broad landscape of pasture-related schemes to a single benchmark model. Following the initial mapping of 50+ pasture-related certifications identified through desk review and institutional sources, the second session generated a shortlist of 12 schemes via structured proposals (primary, backup, creative alternative), and the third session narrowed the shortlist to four finalists for in-depth comparison (Osborn, 1953). The final decision was made through a structured evaluation and voting process. The selected benchmark was ProWeideland (Germany)**,** chosen because the scheme was assessed as having clear technical specifications (including a minimum grazing-days requirement), a transparent monitoring/enforcement structure, and perceived adaptability across different farm sizes; its consumer-facing communication was also considered an asset for market visibility.

Discussion: why this selection is methodologically useful and what it implies for Romania

From a design perspective, the value of the brainstorming + funnel approach is that it converts a highly diverse policy/market landscape into a defensible benchmark choice while keeping the selection logic explicit and reproducible. In early-stage certification design, this matters because credibility depends not only on the final standard but also on the transparency of how the standard was chosen and justified.

The criteria used in the final comparative evaluation—minimum grazing requirements, traceability/documentation, monitoring/enforcement, inclusiveness for small farms, and feasibility in the Romanian context—align with the practical conditions repeatedly cited as critical for successful label implementation: standards must be clear enough to verify, yet feasible enough to adopt at scale (de Koning, 2023).

Selecting ProWeideland as a benchmark does not imply direct transfer without adaptation. Rather, it provides a structured reference point for Romanian design work. Transferable elements include: (i) the logic of a minimum grazing-days requirement and its communicability to consumers, (ii) documentation and traceability routines that can be audited, and (iii) an institutional structure for monitoring and enforcement that supports trust. Elements likely requiring adaptation include threshold-setting (to reflect Romanian seasonal grazing realities), administrative burden (to avoid excluding small farms), and governance arrangements. In Romania, cluster-based collaboration provides an institutional pathway for coordinated action along the value chain; the AgroTransilvania Cluster offers a documented example of a collaborative value-chain model relevant for implementing voluntary certification initiatives (Arion et al., 2023).

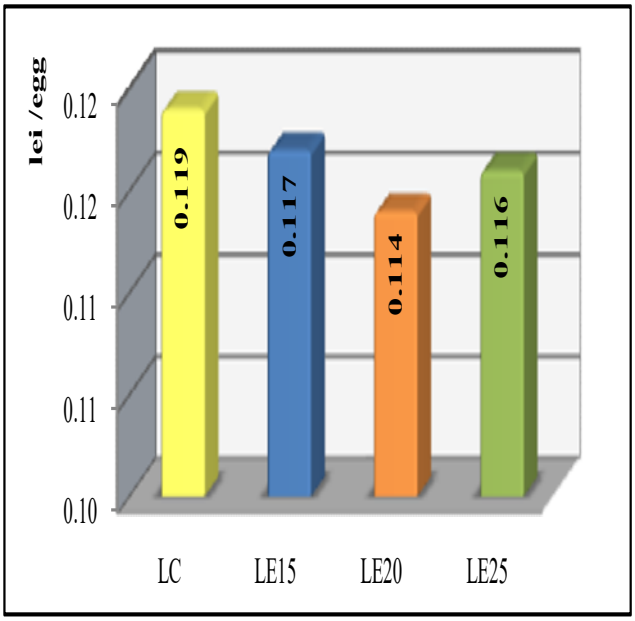

Figure 1. Funnel-based progression of benchmark certification selection through structured brainstorming.

CONCLUSIONS

The structured brainstorming combined with a funnel-based convergence logic provided a transparent pathway for selecting a benchmark grazing-related certification scheme suitable for further adaptation to the Romanian context. The process reduced an initial pool of over 50 pasture-related schemes to 12 shortlisted candidates, then to four finalists, and ultimately to one selected benchmark, ensuring that the selection was not arbitrary but grounded in explicit comparison steps.

ProWeideland (Germany) emerged as the selected benchmark due to its clear minimum grazing requirement, robust documentation and traceability logic, and an institutional structure designed to support monitoring and enforcement. Beyond technical clarity, the scheme was also perceived as having practical implementation features (adaptability across farm sizes) and consumer-facing communication strengths that are relevant for market visibility.

Methodologically, the results suggest that structured brainstorming can be used not only for idea generation but also for defensible comparative decision-making when options are heterogeneous and require expert judgement. Substantively, the selected benchmark offers a concrete reference point for the next phase of work: translating key elements (grazing threshold, verification routines, documentation burden, and governance arrangements) into an approach that fits Romania's seasonal grazing patterns, farm fragmentation, and institutional setting.

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