

## GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS FOR MARKET ACCESS: SOUTH AFRICA MUST PULL UP THE SOCKS

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**M**any times, rural communities are regarded to be poorly developed despite a number of products produced with very unique attributes, specific to a particular rural setting. The unique attributes including soil type, climatic conditions and the indigenous knowledge render a great opportunity through which a given rural community can identify itself from the rest of the world to produce high-quality products that command premium prices in international markets. However, for a unique product to command the attention it deserves while avoiding abuse of the product through counterfeits and other forms of misrepresentation, it should be protected as a geographical indication (GI). A GI is a sign or name used to identify a product from a specific geographic origin and exhibits qualities or reputation attributable to that origin. GIs have proven to be a value-added marketing differentiator as well as an indicator of geographical origin and quality.

South Africa has some GIs protected in the European Union (EU) under the EU-SADC Economic Partnership Agreement but these protected GIs are predominantly alcoholic beverages, specifically wines and only three food products, namely - Karoo lamb meat, Honeybush tea & its infusions, as well as Rooibos tea & its infusions. With the increasing complexity of the nature of agricultural trade worldwide, it is high time South Africa considered securing more protected GIs in the agriculture sector, moreover, even beyond the European Union.

The recent move by the Council of the EU to adopt a decision to sign a stand-alone GIs agreement between the European Union and the government of the People's Republic of China, in which a consideration was taken to extend the scope of GIs to about 200 products (including a number of fruits and vegetable products), is bound to increase the competition faced by South Africa's primary agricultural products, especially fruits in the EU when the agreement enters into force. Also, a free trade agreement (FTA) between Vietnam and the EU came into force on August 01, 2020. The FTA grants protection to 69 Vietnamese GIs in the EU, including fresh & processed fruits and nuts, processed meats (fresh & frozen), fisheries products and alcoholic beverages. This further weighs in to increase the competition.

### **Conclusion**

GIs present a market access opportunity through which in rural communities can easily become integrated into international trade. However, South Africa has so far very few protected GIs specifically for wines, Rooibos tea, Karoo lamb and Honey bush tea. Moreover, these products are only protected within the EU. As done by other countries, including China, Vietnam and Mexico, South Africa should diversify her footprint in protecting GIs both in terms of products and markets. Keen interest should be accorded to fruits, which are mainly destined for the EU, where key trading partners like China have also established a strong presence.

