



Enabling diversity: the 'Organic Hay Region'

A. Strauss and I. Darnhofer¹

Abstract – The 'Organic Hay Region' in the border area Salzburg - Upper Austria (Austria) is an association that focuses its effort to reconnect people, land, and nature through artfully reframing and revaluing traditional practices to address current concerns. The association strengthens regional identity through organic farming and maintaining the traditional practice of preserving cut grass through making hay (rather than silage) to feed dairy cows. It critically engages with neoliberalism and contests the excesses linked with the international agri-industrial complex. The association does so by innovating on-farm, exploring new market-based openings, promoting a diversity of collaborative initiatives and mobilizing stakeholders beyond the 'citizen farmer'.

INTRODUCTION

Alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs), short food supply chains, and civic food networks have been framed as both a reaction to and a manifestation of neoliberalization, as embodied in modernized agriculture as well as in the conventional food processing and distribution system (Guthman 2008).

In this short paper we discuss the extent to which the 'Organic Hay Region' association is able to act politically by contesting the dominant ideology of modernized agriculture, with its narrow focus on reducing costs – especially through scale increase – and framing farmers as businessmen, thus stripping farming of its social dimension.

The association was established in 1996. It currently has about 250 members, and extends its reach further through cooperating with other associations and initiatives. The aim of the association is to maintain small and medium-sized family farms through identifying ways to escape the cost-price squeeze. It focuses on promoting organic farming and on preserving the traditional practice of hay-making. While this may seem narrow and restrictive, it provides a clear identification in the province of Salzburg where almost 50% of UAA is certified organic. Hay making, a traditional production method leading to a specific milk quality, has been reframed to address a broad range of contemporary societal demands: local food, taste, animal welfare, traditional landscapes, regional identity, tourism, environmental protection, climate change.

We argue that the association has effectively increased the 'room for manoeuvre' of farmers, not least through its inclusive approach, thus acknowledging the creative potential enabled by diversity.

Indeed, the initiative not only welcomes a diversity of members, it also encourages a diversity of activities, rather than focusing solely on the food chain. As a result, it not only ensures environmental benefits linked to organic and traditional production practices, but also social benefits through strengthening cohesion and identity.

METHODS

Data was collected in 2014 as part of the RETHINK project. For the purpose of this contribution, we draw on six guided interviews with farmers and regional actors, and a full-day workshop with four farmers directly involved in the association. The interviews and the discussions in the workshop were recorded, transcribed in full, and coded. Through qualitative content analysis three themes emerged that are relevant in the context of neoliberalism.

HARNESSING REGIONAL DIVERSITY

While farming in the region is dominated by milk production, it is noticeable that 'milk' does not figure in the name of the association, thus clarifying that its ambition is territorial, not commodity-specific. In this it contests the dominant framing of agriculture's purpose as producing cheap raw materials for the food industry. Rather, it reaffirms that farming remains multifunctional, that farmers produce food and offer services, that they have a key role to play in the cultural and social life in the region, that they are open to partnerships with SMEs.

The association welcomes a diversity of farms (full- and part-time; milk producers but also herb growers and beekeepers) and encourages value-added activities (e.g. the production of cheese, tea, cosmetics, sales through farm-stores). They facilitate networking activities between farmers (e.g. farms welcoming excursions, holding yearly elections of a 'hay queen') and with the broader public (e.g. farms hosting concerts or welcoming school children), as well as innovative cooperations (e.g. producing organic hay-milk chocolate with a regional SME, cooperating with butchers and bakers).

While managing and encouraging these diverse initiatives certainly involves tensions between diverse interests, it builds on the recognizing the diversity of farms and interests of regional actors, and acknowledging that there is not 'one right way'. In this the association contests both the pressures of modernization and of traditional farming values, which have a strong normative component. Rather, they offer an umbrella for farmers who are interested in innovating and who seek encouragement from

⁶⁸ A. Strauss and I. Darnhofer are both from the University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences Vienna, Institute of Agricultural and Forestry Economics, Vienna, Austria (agnes.strauss@boku.ac.at; ika.darnhofer@boku.ac.at).



like-minded farmers, as well as a platform where they can meet potential cooperation partners.

Also, being inclusive has increased membership, which has opened new options in marketing organic hay milk. Given the large number of members, sufficient 'hay milk' is available to market it through supermarkets (through the widespread organic label 'Ja!Natürlich'). This secured a price premium and promoted the initiative at the national level. The economic success is also viewed as a form of recognition: consumers appreciate this product, which is no longer just a crazy idea or regional niche. This recognition is seen as confirming that the association is on the right path, which fuels further steps.

Indeed, the work of the association is framed as an on-going process and there is a clear awareness, that there are a number of issues that it has not (yet) been able to tackle (e.g. farm succession, the rising burden of bureaucracy and documentation requirements). It is thus well aware of its limitations and of the challenges ahead. But rather than seeing unresolved issues as an indication of failure, it sees it as an open-ended process, where mutual support and cooperation are tools to increase the room for manoeuvre, one step at the time.

CITIZEN FARMERS

The association was initiated by farmers, which can be labelled 'citizen farmers'. The term has been used by Andrée (2009) to characterize farmers with particularly strong ecological and social values, which are committed to practice the type of farming that is important to them, as an expression of their politics.

The citizen farmer is also a contestation of the image of the farmer in modernization, where s/he is mostly seen as an implementer of recommendations produced by scientists and relayed by extension agents, centred around products of the agri-chemical industry, driven by economic rationality.

Yet, the leading members of the association, as citizen-farmers rely on their own ideas and initiatives. They rely on their own expertise and on experiential knowledge shared between farmers. But their concern extends beyond the farm and they are actively engaged in shaping the future of their region, and take responsibility for the impact of farm practices elsewhere and elsewhere, e.g. through pointing out the impact of intensive feeding practices on farming communities in the Global South.

Clearly, not all members of the association are citizen-farmers. Many participate because it presents an economic opportunity, a way to avoid the intensifying competition, the 'race to the bottom'.

ENROLLING THE STATE

While individual entrepreneurship has played a key role in the evolution of the 'Organic Hay Region', the state has also played an important role. The spread of organic farming was enabled through direct pay-

ments, which indirectly supported the association. But it has also received direct recognition, e.g. through declaring hay milk cheese a 'Gourmet Region' (similar to a PDO), or through funding a prize for initiatives that contribute to protect the climate, which the association received in 2012, bringing both visibility and recognition to the association.

DISCUSSION

As Guthman (2008) pointed out, many AAFNs display elements of neoliberalization, which limits the extent to which they can address the social and ecological problems associated with modernized agriculture, food processing and distribution. And indeed, the association 'Organic Hay Region' builds on localism, relies on solutions rooted in individual entrepreneurialism and the market, such as consumer choice, value capture, and labelling. It also gives limited attention to structural issues such as the competition for land or the corporate concentration in the retail sector.

However, the association has also enrolled state action and state resources. They still see the state as provider of subsidies and services, as regulator of externalities. Furthermore, the association builds on collective action e.g. joint marketing of hay milk and organic spelt; buying clubs for organic inputs; joint participation in training events; planting fruit trees with the help of non-farming citizens. It understands these actions as fundamental to strengthening the community of like-minded farmers and regional actors, and as key to preserve the identity and vitality of their region.

The association is seen as contesting the notion that the international agri-industrial complex is the necessary and only possible outcome of neoliberalized markets. Rather, it engages with markets and actively negotiates and expands the spaces they offer. While appreciating autonomy, farmers resist individualization through encouraging cooperation in projects; while using market-based instruments, they resist monetary valuation of every activity; and above all, they resist the homogenisation of farming driven by the imperative to 'get big or get out', through encouraging diversity and seeking strength in collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research was funded by BMLFUW (No. 100939), see: www.wiso.boku.ac.at/en/afo/forschung/rethink

REFERENCES

- Andrée, P. (2009). The neoliberalizing environmentalities of alternative agri-food networks in Australia: A critical examination of challenges and possibilities. Paper presented at the 2009 conference of the Canadian Political Science Assoc.
- Guthman, J. (2008). Neoliberalism and the making of food politics in California. *Geoforum* 39: 1171–1183.