

Organic farming and resilience

Strengthening networks and creative adaptation (Austria)

Summary Family farms in Salzburg contest the one-size-fits-all approach underlying modernization, i.e. its one-sided drive for larger and more capital-intensive farms. To them, diversity is key to the ability to face uncertain futures. A resilient region is thus characterized by a diversity of farms, i.e. specialized and diversified, large and small, organic and conventional, full-time and part-time. This diversity enables each farmer to play to his or her strengths, to change over time, and to cooperate with other farms and SME. It also facilitates on-going innovations to address evolving societal demands for authentic food, new recreation services, environmental protection, renewable energy, and mitigation of climate change. These efforts by farmers would be strengthened by policies that promote open-ended learning processes, value social innovation, and reduce the administrative requirements for small-scale activities. Such a policy framework would enable farmers to unleash their entrepreneurial spirit, empowering them to develop technical and social innovations based on novel combinations of old and new, of local and global, of products and services.

→ Find the complete documentation of the case study at: <http://www.wiso.boku.ac.at/afo/forschung/rethink/>

Introduction

The case study topic

The study focuses on the **resilience** of family farms and the strategies that farmers use to buffer shocks, adapt to change, and transform their activities to ensure persistence. We assess the influence of the context as well as the role of **organic farming**. Indeed, this production method was initially developed by farmers who contested modernisation. It is still linked to farmers who strive to increase their autonomy and room for manoeuvre, who seek innovative ways to address current societal challenges.

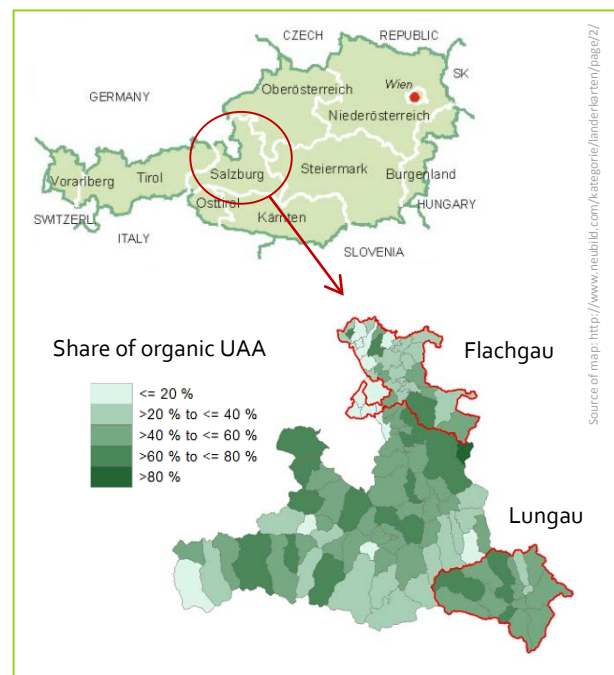
The case study region

For the case study we chose the province of **Salzburg**, as almost 50% of its utilised agricultural area (UAA) is certified organic. To cover the diversity of production conditions, we focused on two regions: the hilly Flachgau and the mountainous Lungau.

Agriculture in Salzburg is characterized by small and medium-sized **family farms**, almost half of which are managed part-time. While milk production is the main agricultural activity, most farms are diversified, i.e. engaged in various on- and off-farm activities. These include offering apartments to tourists, being nature guides or ski instructors, engaging in direct marketing of food, wood and energy production from forests, and

hosting school children to teach them about food and food production.

To collect the **data**, we conducted 53 interviews with farmers and regional stakeholders, and held 10 workshops. To assess the validity of preliminary results and get feedback on them, we held five further workshops.



For the case study we chose two regions of Salzburg: the hilly Flachgau and the mountainous Lungau. Both have a high share of organic farms.

Main lessons learned

The modernisation treadmill

A number of features of modernisation are welcomed, as they make labour easier. However, many farmers resent the on-going **pressure to grow** i.e. the need to invest in larger barns, bigger machinery, and rent additional grassland for feed. They are aware that these investments can only pay off through economies of scale. Yet this growth and specialization leads to a dependence on volatile milk prices and exposes them to the power of supermarkets which dictate product specifications. Also, the increased capitalization forces dependence on banks and reduces the ability to take new opportunities as they emerge.



The pressure to keep growing is seen by farmers as leading to a treadmill from which it is difficult to escape.

Especially farms in **mountainous areas** have to cope with steep slopes and short growing seasons. They cannot be as efficient as farms in flatter areas or with milder climate.

Given their commitment to the farm, which has often been in the family for several generations, farmers actively search for alternatives to modernization.

Key features of resilient family farms

Nourish possibility through diversity. Diversity enables innovative combinations of traditional and new; of technical and social innovations; of agricultural and non-agricultural products and services.

Actively manage diversity. Engaging in too many activities can lead to burnout. When engaging in a new activity, identify which old activity will be discontinued.



A diversified farm, e.g. one engaging in tourism, offering educational services to school children, or actively managing its forest, is stronger and thus able to weather a storm.

Balance exploitation and exploration. To be successful on the short term a farm needs to exploit current strengths. To be successful on the long term, the farm needs to explore options through experimentation.

Remain connected to the context. The need to adapt is driven by events on the farm as well as by events in the broader context. By being connected, e.g. through engaging in different networks, the need to adapt can be recognized earlier.

Engage in open-ended processes. Change is less about projects with a clear outcome and defined path to get there. It is more about an on-going process of fine-tuning and seizing opportunities as they emerge.

Question assumptions. Traditions are often useful guidelines, but can sometimes be too narrow and restrictive. Many promising ideas were not realized because someone said: "That's not how it's done!" or: "A real farmer does not do that!"

Open up and cooperate. While cooperating with others is not always an easy process, it is often rewarding as it allows to benefit from each other's ideas, to share the risks, and to allocate labour flexibly.

Ensure quality of life. While there will be labour intensive periods on the farm, it is important to take a 'time out' to recharge one's battery and strengthen family cohesion.



A good quality of life on the family farm is essential to ensure succession. To many farmers, this means less administrative paperwork, a selective use of mechanisation, and a good work-life balance.

Networks and informal knowledge

Farmers appreciate the quality of the **formal training** offered in vocational schools and in courses for further agricultural training. This training is important to keep up with developments in technologies, regulations and documentation requirements.



Training should not only focus on production techniques and economics, but also cover 'soft skills', such as time management and conflict resolution.

However, the transfer of (standardized) information has its limits. Farmers pointed out that with the increasing speed of change, and with the diversity of skills needed to manage a multifunctional farm (rather than just commodity production) **new knowledge needs** are emerging. Indeed, a farmer needs to build alliances with other rural stakeholders, to interact with customers. Soft skills are thus increasingly important to enable effective communication, to facilitate group processes, to resolve conflicts, and to manage open-ended learning processes. These skills are seen as essential to initiate cooperations, to strengthen the commitment to a joint initiative, to overcome challenging periods, and identify to nurture new ideas.

To ensure continued learning and locally adapted knowledge, **informal networks** play a key role: the unstructured meetings allow to address emerging issues, and the on-going exchanges build trust. This trust is essential for open discussions, e.g. discussing why an experiment did not work out and what can be learned from it (rather than seeing it as a 'failure' and fearing to be ridiculed for incompetence).

Rethinking modernization builds on understanding path dependency and path creation!

These discussions and the contextual knowledge they generate encourage farmers to identify novel approaches to tackle their individual needs. They also allow identifying potential partners for **joint initiatives** or for developing new products, innovative services or different marketing approaches.

'Rethinking' modernization

Rethinking modernization implies acknowledging that **family farms** are different from corporations. Their aim is not short-term profit maximisation, but ensuring the livelihood of the family. Their work is embedded in family traditions and broader social networks. Also, society expects a diverse set of services and public goods from farms. These multiple aims and constraints need to be taken into account in approaches to farm management, and in the design of formal training.

Social innovation is key to balance the one-sided emphasis on technical innovation typical for modernisation. Social innovation enables farmers to identifying new roles for farms in rural areas and new ways for farms to address societal needs. Formal institutions need to be adapted, to enable them to foster social innovations and open-ended social learning processes.



Cooperation reduces the work load of family members and allows to integrate complementary skills.

While **organic farming** has the potential to strengthen various aspects that contribute to farm resilience, it is only effective if the principles and values underlying organic farming are implemented. Moreover, organic farming needs to be understood as a 'living system', i.e. one that keeps changing and developing. At the regional level, the high share of organic farms in Salzburg has contributed to diversity, through maintaining small farms and encouraging initiatives.



As organic farmers did in the 1980s and early 1990s, it is important to have the courage to go off the beaten track, even if it is not easy at first.

Empowerment through self-organization – The story of the 'Organic Hay Region'

In 1996 a small group of organic dairy farmers started to cooperate. Their aim was to strengthen their power in the negotiations with regional dairy processors and ensure a separate processing of their **organic milk**. Their success in establishing an organic milk value chain – not least by securing the marketing through a large supermarket chain – strengthened their community. Today the network has about 250 members. They not only promote organic farming, but also the traditional practice of haymaking.



Farmers and other regional actors successfully combine innovative ideas and traditional practices to address current social concerns.

(Source: Helmut Mühlbacher; www.herzundliebe.com/bio-heu-region)

The association welcomes a **diversity** of farms (full- and part-time; milk producers, herb growers and beekeepers) and has encouraged a wide range of value-added activities. The association facilitates **networking** activities between farmers and promotes collaboration, e.g. towards joint direct marketing. They also enabled the successful cooperation with a regional SME to produce organic hay milk chocolate.

Through their activities, they raise awareness of the **environmental benefits** linked to organic farming and to the traditional practice of hay making. Indeed, their integrated approach contributes to climate change mitigation: CO₂-emissions are reduced through the grassland-based production system (reduction of the use of concentrate) and through the processing of milk in regional cheese dairies (short routes).

They also organise the crowning of a 'hay queen' and various events to **interact with consumers** who are interested in knowing more about how food is produced and how to support regional farmers. These activities have strengthened social cohesion and regional identity.

Some key recommendations

Acknowledge the diversity of farms. Small family farms have different strengths and different needs than large commercial farms. Provide targeted support for both.

Reduce the complexity of regulations. Diversified farms are increasingly overwhelmed with the task of keeping abreast of the on-going changes of regulations. Moreover, many of the measures in the regulations are designed with large industrial plants in mind, and are unsuited for artisanal production.

Provide 'seed funds'. Financial support should be provided for social innovation, not just for technical innovation. Yet support for social innovation is often seen as difficult to justify, as the outcome is not predefined, but emerges in through a process of trial-and-error where an idea is modified and refined.

Encourage open-ended learning processes. Farmers do not need just technical advisors, they also need facilitators and coaches to structure social learning processes. Independent platforms for informal learning networks enable a learning through reflexion about 'mistakes', encourage the questioning of traditions that narrow options, and promote innovations.

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