

# Strengthening the positive links between organic farming and a sustainable development of rural areas

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**Abstract** - Organic farming can play a major role in the sustainable development of rural areas. Our assumption is that it supports the finding of a new balance between societal demands for high environmental quality, the pressures resulting from competition in a world market economy and a wide array of rural development goals and initiatives. The German 'Regional Action - Rural Areas Shaping the Future' pilot programme has been implemented in order to gain best-practice models for securing the economic, ecological and social viability of rural areas and for trial-testing a new integrated, bottom-up approach. In this contribution we present the results of an analysis of the project databank of the Regional Action pilot programme. It is concluded that the projects that are being implemented can be interpreted as aiming at a reconstitution of nature-society relations, indicating that agriculture and the potential of rural areas are no longer being evaluated in mono-functional terms.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Within the new paradigm of a more sustainable and a multifunctional agriculture production remains only one among various functions of agriculture (Knickel, 2001; Pretty, 1998). The guiding idea is that through multifunctionality agricultural enterprises can create a broader basis of income generation and at the same time gains greater appreciation of their outputs from society (Knickel, 2001; Wilson, 2001). Besides food and non-food crops, agriculture produces environmental, social and cultural non-commodity outputs (Hervieu, 2003; Green et al., 2006). The aesthetic and cultural value of agriculturally shaped landscapes in turn can to a considerable extent be valorised, for example, by realising rural tourism potentials (Knickel, 2001; Pretty, 2002).

New political measures and programmes reflect these considerations (Knickel and Peter, 2005). The 'Regional Action - Rural Areas Shaping the Future' pilot programme is an example of a new type of support scheme that specifically addresses the development of economic activities as well as their linkages with the enhancement of environmental quality. The Federal Ministry of Agriculture (BMVEL) initiated it in 2001. The active generation of synergy is central to the activities and their combination at farm and regional level. While specialisation in agri-

cultural production and segregation of agriculture from other rural activities had been envisaged in the past, multifunctional and amenity-led development is focused on mutual benefits and 'win-win situations' created by different activities (Brunori and Rossi, 2000; Knickel and Renting, 2000).

## THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURAL AMENITIES

The preservation of rural landscapes attractive for living and tourism is an important goal in all of the model regions. The model regions' landscape potentials such as lakes and flower-rich grasslands and infrastructures such as hiking trails offer visitors and the local population possibilities for leisure activities. These interrelations are reflected in the main aims of the projects implemented: For 37 percent of the almost 730 projects that have been implemented in the 18 model regions since the beginning in 2002, the development of eco-tourism plays a major role, followed by agriculture and nature conservation with 34 percent (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Importance of projects addressing relevant interfaces.

Project aims at ....	Number of projects	Share of projects
... maintaining/enhancing biodiversity	27	4%
... maintaining/enhancing landscape character/diversity	89	12%
... maintaining/enhancing cultural heritage of region	33	5%
...adding value to natural resources (other than landscape)	95	13%
... adding value to landscape (generally)	12	2%
...adding value to landscape through eco-tourism	117	16%
Other	353	49%
Total	726	100%

Source: Own compilation based on BMELV 2006

In 52 percent of all projects, adding value to landscape and other natural resources as well as their enhancement or maintenance is a clearly recognisable, explicit objective. A share of 13 percent of all projects is mainly aimed at adding value to natural resources such as wild plants (berries, herbs, etc.) or biomass. 18 percent of all projects are mainly aimed at adding value to regional landscapes, mostly through eco-tourism (16 percent).

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Maintaining or enhancing the character and diversity of regional landscapes plays a major role for 12 percent of the projects, while a small share of projects primarily focuses on the cultural heritage of regional landscapes (5 percent) or maintaining or increasing biodiversity (4 percent).

Due to the integrated, intersectoral alignment, the contents of the projects are addressing development processes that take place at several interfaces. A share of 16 percent of all projects is located at the interface between agriculture and landscape/nature, a share of 5 percent at the interface between nature and the overall (economic) development of the region.

#### DISCUSSION

Projects that simultaneously pursue ecological and social goals, and that aim at a valorisation of environmental and natural resources effectively link the three pillars and goals of sustainable development.

The characterization of the many new fields of activities that contribute to the developments in the model regions as multidimensional is in line with the view that strict segregation of different functions (living, producing, recreating, conserving nature, etc.) is less and less realizable. The related reconfiguration of resources often goes beyond the individual farm gate (Knickel and Renting, 2000). Tourists enjoy the beauty of the landscape (aesthetic function), drinking water schemes try to keep water clean (abiotic function), diversity of flora and fauna is perceived and protected as a valuable good (biotic function) and farmers still use the land for production and income generation (production and income functions).

For organic farming the positive interrelations can be even more pronounced. The working with nature idea of organic farming supplies a 'unifying concept' for creating coherence between the various activities. High-quality agricultural production with a high added value should be regarded as a key to balanced development.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Agriculture and the potential of rural areas are no longer being evaluated in monofunctional terms. Farming - more than other economic activities - produces a range of goods and services, including those amenities that are appreciated by society but that do not have a real price in the market. Regional actors perceive a balanced economic development as a precondition for strengthening the role of farmers as producers of services, landscapes and biodiversity. The other way round, high-quality agricultural production with a high added value can be regarded as the key to a balanced overall rural development. Rural areas can in this respect be seen as trendsetters for a sustainable development.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper has been inspired by the *Amenities and Rural Development: Theory, Methods and Public Policy* Conference, Madison, Wisconsin, June 18-19, 2004, University of Wisconsin-Madison, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

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