

Eco-Regions: How to link organic farming with territorial development

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Abstract

Organic farming in Austria has seen a rapid development as all over Europe. In some alpine regions over 50% of the farms have converted to organic. Thus the idea of forming "Eco-Regions" ("Bioregionen" in German), transforming organic farming values from a farm level to a regional scale, emerged. The paper presents the results of an action research based project to develop a model for the formation of Eco-Regions and to monitor the success in cross-sectoral networking. Besides a number of prerequisites also bottlenecks for the formation become apparent. The paper describes the model and the implementation in two distinct regions.

Introduction

Organic farming in Austria has seen a rapid development as all over Europe. According to official data in 2006 13,4% of the agricultural area of Austria have been farmed organically by 11,6% of all farms (BMLFUW 2007). Some regions however, most of them in the alpine area have reached significantly higher percentages up to over 50%. These high percentages provoked the idea of transforming organic farming from a farm level to a regional scale This is the basic meaning of "Eco-Region" ("Bioregion" in German), a concept which has entered the rural development debate since 2001 (Schermer & Kratochvil 2003). Thus the notion of "Eco-Region" in the Austrian context constitutes a sustainable territorial development approach based on local organic farming practices and products as ideational anchor points and on an active participation of organic farmers in such processes. This understanding of Eco-regions complies with the current shift from sectoral to territorial development policies. The CAP views rural spaces increasingly from a territorial perspective as opposed to the traditional sectoral view on rural development. It thus allocates partly funds under the measurements of the "second pillar" activities for integrated rural development, not only connected to agriculture. Organic farming is supposed to contribute to rural development more than other forms of farming, in particular due to the close ties between producers and consumers. The concept, building on the theory of neo-endogenous development (Ray 1998), provides benefits for organic farmers as well as for the region. For the organic sector the concept provides a possibility to reconnect production to a given territory and to focus on regional value chains as counterstrategy to the "conventionalisation trap" (Kratochvil & Leitner 2005) which is progressing with the increasing demand for organic products by consumers and the globalisation of trade relations. For rural development the concept provides the possibility to sharpen the notion of sustainability by providing a concrete example (Schermer, 2006).

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This contribution looks into the processes of formation, the preconditions and steps to link organic agriculture successfully with territorial development.

Material and Methods

As in the recent past a number of Austrian regions started to declare themselves Eco-Regions, the concerned stakeholders called for a systematisation and codification of the approach in order to prevent free riders. A participatory action research approach was chosen as the methodological project for a research and implantation oriented project. Action research builds on a cyclical process in four stages: planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and finally reflection to adjust planning (Zuber Skerrit, 2002).

The national funded project on Eco-Regions as a model for sustainable development was commissioned by the federal ministry of agriculture and implemented between beginning of 2004 and November 2007. During the first phase (2004 until March 2007) at least four participative workshops were held in each of four regions. The participants came from various stakeholder groups involved in Eco Region initiatives in different geographical areas and stages of Eco-Region development. These workshops aimed at reflecting on the concept in order to define a basic set of criteria for developing a general model. The participants furthermore designed concrete activities linking different actors in the region (tourism, commerce, culture etc.). The number and type of actors varied according to regional circumstances. The monitoring of the implementation of the designed activities, carried out in the frame of bi-monthly meetings, contributed to a general understanding of various difficulties rural actors may have in promoting territorial development. It also helped to derive guidelines for the sequence of stakeholder involvement and for the establishment of a coherent vision for regional development including concrete activities for implementation.

In the second phase (April to November 2007) concrete concepts were developed on the basis of the results of phase one in two of the four initial regions. The activities foreseen in these concepts will be implemented within the frame of the new LEADER program.

Results

The model, which was elaborated during the first project-phase, shows that Eco-Regions are conceptualised as an ongoing process rather than a fixed status. Therefore most of the criteria proposed are procedural. Minimum criteria as prerequisites include a clear delineation of the region, a percentage of organic farms above the national average and the setting up of a regional organisational structure for organic farming. The main instrument is the elaboration of a comprehensive development concept with concrete measures according to fixed obligatory development domains. These include measures on the further development of organic organisation, regional processing and marketing, cooperation with other sectors (gastronomy, tourism and commerce), internal and external communication, renewable energy, nature and cultural landscape. In addition to these compulsory topics the region is free to select further optional topics according to regional relevance.

The Eco-Region model postulates that the starting point is the local organic agriculture and their products. Different stakeholder groups (most often but not always organic farmers) start the process with an assessment on the potential fulfilment of the basic

requirements. Preferably the elaboration of the Eco-Region concept goes in parallel with networking activities. First local organic farmers form a group, in a second stage this group networks along the supply chain and in the third stage with other territorial partners. This model is an ideal situation, which in the second phase was applied to two regions, where detailed development concepts were elaborated in a participatory process. These two regions differ largely according to the basic criteria, although in both cases the percentage of organic farmers is above the national average. The two regions also display different possible situations and paths in Eco-Region development:

The first region, the “Bio-Heu-Region Trumer Seenland” is organised by an organic cooperative with roughly 180 members. The delineation of the region follows cultural practices (silage free, hay based dairy farming, which was a base of the local dairy industry) and geographical boundaries provided by the watershed of a series of lakes. However, administratively the region touches two provinces (Salzburg and Upper Austria). The overlap with different administrative regions makes it difficult to link up with regional development organisations as for instance there are three LEADER regions involved. The proponents of the Bio-Heu-Region are very active in promoting the region, by e.g. electing a “hay queen” as a representative and organising all kinds of activities. However, links to other sectors remain rather weak, besides building up supply chains for niche products (like spelt) they have punctual co-operations with a cultural centre and local tourism offices, but so far they failed to involve the local dairy industry which is the backbone of agriculture. On the contrary the conventional dairies operate with the designation “region of delicacy – hay-milk cheese” declared by the federal ministry of agriculture.

The second region, the “Bioregion Murau”, comprises one distinct district with clear administrative, geographical and culture-historical boundaries. Other than in the first case the initial idea of installing an Eco-Region was not primarily developed by organic and/or agricultural actors, but rather by local entrepreneurs. A core group, consisting of a baker, a plumbing entrepreneur, an organic farmer and a local rural development advisor, who is also a (conventional) farmer, proposed the Eco-Region concept. They formed a platform installing working groups in different sections (energy, agriculture, tourism and commerce). The organisational structure however is not very well developed. The local organic farmers are barely organised in a group, which makes it easy for market actors to appropriate the image of the Eco-Region for their ends. This happened when a big discounter, which is the major customer of the regional milk processing plant, launched a new strictly conventional brand, which plays with the natural image of the region and promotes the silage free traditional production methods. Most organic farmers go along with this as long as the milk price is increased.

Discussion

The most stunning result is that (so far) both Eco Regions, in spite of high percentages of organic farmers, did not defend their concept successfully against the conventional farming sector. The reasons are different in the two regions.

In the Bio-Heu-Region the distinction between the Eco-Region and the (conventional) hay-milk region is blurred in public although the president of the hay-milk region is an organic farmer himself and a member of the Bio-Heu-Region. Apparently, the organic farmers feel too weak to force the dairies, which operate both, conventional and organic processing lines, to market their cheese better and to pay a higher price to

organic farmers. They started a number of activities which were raising the profile of the Eco-Region, but they are lacking strategic planning in order to take the lead in territorial development. It is probably asked too much from farmers to act as regional development agents, but without strategic planning to secure a larger part of the added value, the regional networking remains weak. The elaboration of an Eco-Region concept can be seen as a first step in the right direction.

In the Bioregion Murau the main focus of the proponents is on enhancing the regional added value. This aim can be achieved in various ways, the Eco-Region being only one of them. The new brand finds widely support, although it is a conventional brand. Organic farmers are not organised in a strong group and cannot defend their case against conventional farmers, who are particularly happy to participate in the new program as they could not in the frame of the Eco-Region. The underlying problem is that contrary to the sequence proposed in the model the actors in Murau started with regional networking before the organic farmers were organised.

Conclusions

Eco-Regions provide a frame which could allow organic stakeholders to play a key role for territorial development. The current experiences however show that their success has been limited so far, due to different reasons. In Murau one of the very prerequisites was and is missing: the formation of a group of organic farmers. Hence, the idea is weakly defended against usurpation by other actors. In the Bio-Heu-Region all prerequisites had been achieved, but strategic planning skills to build successful trans-sectoral cooperations is lacking.

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