

# Beer from the mountains—Value creation through bridging rural/urban and local/global

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**Abstract – This paper presents a case study of a farmers' cooperative, Gran Alpin, selling mountain cereal products to mainly urban consumers. It employs and constantly reproduces values of local and place while marketing to mostly extra-local consumers. High levels of trust are maintained through multiple relations in the local network and decisive for successfully transporting the cooperative's values from the local to the global, from the rural to the urban.**

## INTRODUCTION

In reaction to an increasingly difficult economic environment for agriculture in mountain areas in Switzerland, in 1987, a group of two organic farmers and a veterinary founded the cooperative Gran Alpin (GA) in the canton of Grisons. Its goals are:

- Support of mountain arable farming
- Maintaining the cultural/traditional landscape
- Reasonable prices for farmers – better than usual prices for organic produce
- Additional income for farmers, contribution to the resilience of farms
- Supply of the region with cereal products

Currently there are 95 farmer members producing around 500t of cereal on 160ha land. Processing of the grains is done as much as possible in the canton, while the end products, such as grains, flour, bread and beer can be found in markets of one large retailer all over Switzerland. Local/regional restaurants, hotels, and bakeries play a secondary role, as do specialty shops in larger cities across the country.

Over the years, GA has continuously grown, and although it still operates in a limited market, it has established its niche creating economic value in the canton. This is achieved by building on cultural values of tradition and localness that are successfully communicated and sold to consumers outside the region. We were interested in how this combination of local and extra-local is put into practice: how cultural and economic value is created, and how these values are successfully transported in the supply chain; bridging across local and global food supply chains, as well as across the 'rural' and the 'urban'.

## METHODS

We collected and analysed information from four different sources: 1) scientific literature; 2) grey literature and information from websites; 3) the movie "Biobergackerbau hat Zukunft" ("Organic mountain cereal production has a future") from Wissensmanagement Umwelt GmbH (2013); 4) interviews with key experts. Altogether, we

conducted nine interviews: 3 with current and previous general managers and board members from GA, 3 farmers (of which one is also a board member), one miller, one brewer, and one baker. They were spread across different valleys in the canton of Grisons. The interviews were carried out by one or two researchers in March 2016, lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were partly transcribed. The content was analysed to answer the research questions.

## FINDINGS

The supply chain of GA consists of a very locally oriented one, and one involving the globally operating retailer (see fig. 1); both are connected. E.g. the cooperative both collaborates with a small local mill in a very remote village in Grisons and with a large mill that is a subsidiary of the group of the retailer. For the local mill, GA cereals constitute 70% of its annual production of 200t; for the large mill the processed 200t of GA cereals equal 1/100 of the annual turnover (200.000t). The values involved in GA are multiple: In its name, the cooperative GA carries the notion of mountain origin ("alpin"), and slightly more hidden, the relation to the canton of Grisons: "Gran" is an artificial word, derived from the different variations of the regional Rhaeto-Romanic language, meaning cereal. This illustrates the strong identification with the region and its characteristics of mountains, tradition, and heritage. "Tradition" goes beyond the place of production to also include landscape and production and processing methods. All interviewed persons referred to their contribution and cherishing of tradition: "*We're not here to produce as much as possible, but to practice agriculture and take care that the landscape stays intact*" (farmer in the movie "Bergackerbau"). Aesthetics thus also plays a role, connected to what people referred to as historical picture of the landscape (in German: "Kulturlandschaft").

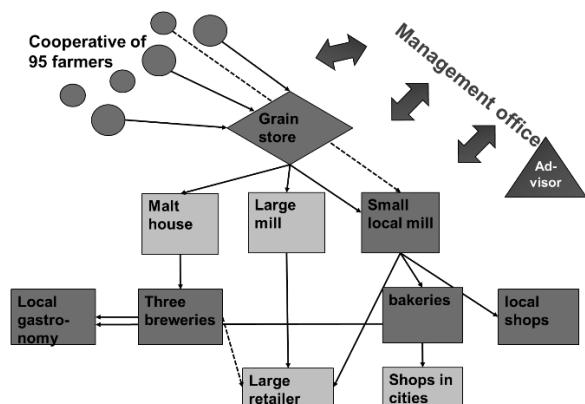
All interviewees mentioned the importance of maintaining local networks, and producing a local

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product. Local identity seems to be re-produced continuously through personal ties between different market partners, often in very limited (village/valley) perimeters, and in these relationships, local knowledge is exchanged and further built up, e.g. when the baker visits the farmer to discuss possibilities for producing a particular type of cereal for a specialty product. As a baker told: "[...] We can present this here. If it's about the oats or the eggs – I can show you. I can tell you from which farmer. We know where the raw products come from." Local knowledge is also involved in processing – be it as miller dealing with non-standardized specialty produce or as a baker dealing with raw material in varying qualities, and not pre-prepared. So the network of specific local knowledge creates a particular (high) quality within GA, and marketing GA products contributes to maintaining local knowledge and infrastructure.



**Figure 1.** Supply chains of Gran Alpin  
dark colour: local actors; light colour: extra-local  
actors

The strong sense of local and place is also important for bridging between the local and the global when marketing GA products through a large retailer's market chain. Ultimately, it leads to high levels of trust, which are critical for the longstanding marketing relations of local actors with partners outside the region. The following quote from the local brewer on how he first met the responsible person from COOP illustrates this: "...It took a while until I found the right building, it was so huge. Then I

entered, and then [the responsible from COOP] came to greet me, and when I saw that he wore this [typical traditional] belt, I knew that I would get along with him. And that's how it was...."

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

GA links up with the organic movement, and (partly) uses established marketing structures, so we can conclude that this is an example of a 'real utopia' for transforming the food system (Cucco and Fonte 2015). The market chain is strongly integrated by the values embedded in the product(s); the strong identification with "place" (i.e. Grisons and mountains) is reflected in communication to consumers. Local structures are pivotal to maintain this identity and the specific knowledge attached to it. Small entities are well-suited for processing small quantities while ensuring high quality, and allow direct communication between market actors. The local knowledge is inherent to the product's quality and a functioning local supply chain contributes to maintaining knowledge and infrastructure in the region. Its success rests on enabling experiential local learning in connection with the use of (partly extra-local) expert knowledge.

In conclusion, GA contributes to "fixing the placeless foodscape" by utilizing both ideas of place and local (Hinrichs 2015). The high level of trust in the relationships between the actors, be it local or beyond, is decisive for successfully transporting the cooperative's values from the local to the global, from the rural to the urban.

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