

The Concept of Eco-regions in Austria

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Abstract

The paper aims to provide a closer look into the concept of eco-regions in Austria. The idea behind this concept is to merge organic farming and rural development into a territorial strategy. The actors proposing this are coming from the farmers' side as well as from various stakeholders in regional development.

The results of a survey provide an overview and a base for a preliminary classification of the various approaches. They also show that each region has a specific problem situation and the eco-region provides an answer to this individual situation.

The "Eco-region National Park Hohe Tauern" is used as a specific case study to assess the impact of this concept using the rural livelihood framework. This case study shows that the concept of eco-regions provides a range of improvements to the livelihood of small organic farms in lagging regions. Moreover it allows forging new alliances, which can help to extend the philosophy of sustainability inherent to organic farming also to other actors and sectors in the region. Thus it provides a frame for a territorial application of the principles of organic farming. But the case study reveals also potential dangers, especially by powerful market partners using the concept for their purposes, dominating the further development and creating new dependencies.

Finally some general conclusions for the preconditions necessary to establish eco-regions are drawn.

Introduction

The concept of eco-regions ("Bioregionen" in German) is gaining increasingly importance in the rural development debate in Austria (Schermer, 2003). The idea of eco-regions emerged during recent years in the context of regional and rural development as well as of organic farming (Groier 1998). It is perceived as an important chance for organic farming, but also for the regional development, especially of mountain areas. Contrary to approaches in other countries (like the "bioregion" concept in the English speaking world) it means in the Austrian context a sustainable regional development approach based on the principles of organic farming which are applied also to other economic sectors.

Various stakeholders from the regions themselves have started to propose this concept and to call their region a "Bioregion". The idea to merge "organic" and "region" meets the interests of different stakeholders:

- Organic farmers hope to reduce the exchangeability of their products in indirect marketing channels. This danger is increasingly felt under the prospects of EU-enlargement.
- Representatives of the agricultural sector want to avoid decoupling of food production from the maintenance of the cultural landscape.
- The retailers want to increase trust into their products and foster long term consumer relations.

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- Consumer organisations expect more traceability and food safety from organic products out of a specific region.
- Environmental NGOs support the decrease of food miles by regional production in addition the environmental friendly production method of organic farming.
- Regional development agencies aim to increase the regional added value while strengthening regional identity at the same time. They want to profile the region better in the ongoing “competition of regions” especially by creating additional programs for tourist activities.

This paper examines mainly the impact of eco-regions on small scale organic farmers in mountain regions of Austria. It starts from the hypothesis that eco-regions can offer new opportunities for small organic farmers and help to bridge the shift from production to protection. Moreover eco-regions are supposed to contribute significantly to the sustainable development of lagging rural regions.

The first section of the paper gives a short description of the concept of eco-regions and presents the results of a survey on its various current expressions in Austria.

The second section analyses the impact of the concept using the framework of sustainable rural livelihoods as developed by Scoones (1998).

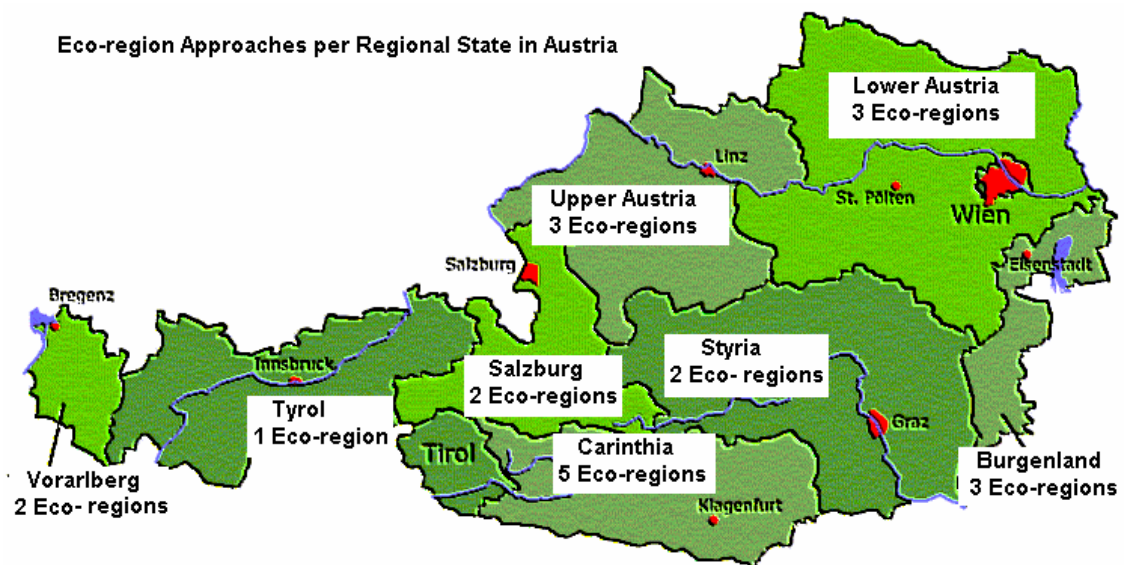
In doing so the paper follows a case study approach. First a brief description of the process describes how the concept of an eco-region developed in the case study region. Then the implications on the livelihood of the organic farmers concerned are analysed according to the elements of the sustainable rural livelihood framework.

At the end of the paper some general conclusions for the conditions, under which eco-regions can be established, are presented.

The present status of the concept of Eco-regions in Austria

In order to assess the present situation, I tried to compile an overview of potential eco-regions out of various sources (secondary literature, news clippings, personal communication with actors in the organic scene, internet search). Even if I missed out some, the number included already provides a quite comprehensive picture.

I managed to trace an eco-region approach in all regional states of Austria. All in all, 22 regions with more than 30 single initiatives were identified that stated the “eco-region” more-or-less as a goal for their development. In nine regions I found explicit references to the term “Bioregion” (eco-region). A special case is the trans-boundary eco-region “Bio Alpe Adria”, which includes Carinthia in Austria, Friaul in Italy and the whole of Slovenia.



Some general points emerged from this initial survey:

- The definition of “region” varies. Generally the delineation follows functional criteria or natural boundaries rather than administrative boundaries. In some cases it is only one municipality, in others it crosses administrative boundaries and reaches up to a regional state or even across borders. In at least one case a protected area serves as a territorial boundary.
- Regarding the inception of the idea most of the initiatives are producer led, but often the retailing sector, especially the supermarket chains are stimulating the development by voicing out the consumer demand.
- Also the structural fund acts as a catalyst in many ways. They often integrate environmental concerns with economic endeavour. Especially the LEADER programs play a prominent role. In 12 regions identified a LEADER II program was active. Most of the regions continue currently under Leader +. Three areas were Objective 1 in the last program period. Moreover, most of the regions are part of an LFA according to the EU-criteria and received support by the Objective 5b program between 1995 and 2000. Such support in particular stimulated the formation of organic marketing initiatives, which were often starting points for the idea of eco-regions.
- Not everywhere “organic” agriculture is explicitly mentioned, some talk about being “close to nature” etc. I therefore also included some approaches where regional agriculture with some component of organic is used as a base for regional development.
- Efforts to improve the marketing of regional products constitute almost everywhere the triggering effect for the development of an eco-region.

The different approaches were classified, modifying the concept of “Culture Economies” as developed by Ray (1998, 2001):

- At least ten groups try to tie organic products to the region and use the concept to **market their products** better. These initiatives stretch over eight regions, which could be classified “eco-regions as regions of origin”. Marketing is directed on channels within the region, towards outside or a combination of both. For those supplying supermarket chains the main goal is to reduce the danger of substitution with organic products from more favoured regions. Others favour short supply chains in order to extend their influence up to the end consumer.
- In at least fourteen cases the promotion of the region via an organic image and organic products is an important factor. Some focus on tourism only, others try to integrate agriculture with other economic sectors (processors and retailers) to create added value for the region. These regions use

the eco-region as a strategy for **marketing the region**. Six regions opt for a general vision of sustainability, while four build their strategy on tourism and another four on environmental issues.

- In five regions organic farming is more or less explicitly the leading vision for the agricultural development. They use the concept of eco-regions to **promote a sustainable sectoral agricultural development**.

The above mentioned goals are pursued using three basic strategies in relations to their participation in the overall global market development (Ray, 2001). Either they aim to improve their competitive situation, or they want to cope with the global development using strategies of diversification. The third possible approach would be to disconnect from the world markets as far as possible and to focus on local circuits only.

Those who follow the strategy of **competition** try to improve the position of the producers by horizontal integration or forging vertical networks along the supply chain. Improving the competitive situation of the region means in the Austrian case most often a co-operation with tourism. Such co-operations were identified in at least nine cases. Strengthening the competition within the agricultural sector means building up organic networks of processors and clusters, which can feed into the mainstream markets.

Diversification strategies require a variety of strategic actions applied at the same time, some directed to improve marketing within the region, others outside. Also in this case co-operation with the processing industry, specialised local and regional retailers, tourism and the environmental sector is sought. In five regions, protection of nature is prominent and the eco-region is linked to a protected area or a national park. In some more regions, the maintenance of the cultural landscape is a focal aspect.

A pronounced strategy of **disconnection** from the globalising market development, which would result in favouring regional subsistence, is hardly found. As in Austria both, neo-endogenous development and organic farming have already moved out of the “alternative” corner towards the mainstream, their role of playing an ideological opposition has largely vanished (Dax 2001).

In general the concept in its present state shows a large variety of expressions. A preliminary typology (Schermer 2003) lists nine different expressions. The different goals and strategies are not mutually exclusive, in some cases more goals than one are pursued simultaneously with more strategies than one. This high variation in the expressions can be attributed to the fact, that each region has a specific problem situation and the eco-region provides an answer to this individual situation.

The aim of the paper is to show the impact of the concept on the livelihoods of organic farmers. Due to the high variation of the concept this it is difficult to do this on a general level. The paper follows therefore a case study approach. The following section presents the results of an in depth case study which was selected out of the survey results.

The Case of the “Eco-region Hohe Tauern”

Methodological Remarks

Case study selection and data collection

I initially selected the region “National Park Hohe Tauern” in the regional state of Salzburg, because it was one of the first regions where the term “eco-region” was used. It represents a mountainous region typically for many other regions in Austria. Their eco-region approach combines different goals targeted by different actors: There is a big retailer chain involved who wants to promote its products using the image of the region; the National Park management aims to promote the region itself via sustainable tourism; finally the LEADER group, coming from the farmers side, is proposing to establish organic

farming as the leading concept for the further development of farming. Thus all three major objectives identified in the survey are simultaneously present. The main strategy is to improve the competitive situation of agriculture, but also elements of coping strategies are present.

I tried to follow up the process of the concept development over a longer period. Therefore I relied to some extent on analysis of secondary data especially newspaper articles. In particular I went through the weekly regional farmers' magazine "Salzburger Bauer" from 1994 onwards. Other media clippings related to the region were sampled at random. The literature survey included, besides statistical data, also a publication from a research project on regional marketing strategies (Hebertshuber 1998), which had also used the region for an in depth case study. This background information was supplemented by personal interviews with key actors.

The Sustainable Rural Livelihoods framework

I use the concept of sustainable rural livelihoods as a framework to describe the impact of the concept of eco-regions on the rural livelihood of the region in general and of the organic farmers in particular.

The concept of sustainable rural livelihoods is primarily a product of the debate on sustainable rural development in developing countries (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998). In recent years it has also gained importance in the transitional process of CEE countries. It has been also adapted to the context of EU-countries (see amongst others: Kinsella et al., 2000). Out of the various variations of the concept in use the paper builds on the IDS concept (Scoones, 1988). Scoones defines the key question to be asked in any analysis of sustainable livelihood as follows:

"Given a particular context (of policy settings, politics, history, agroecology and socio-economic conditions) what combinations of livelihood resources (different types of capital) result in the ability to follow what combination of livelihood strategies (agricultural intensification/extensification, livelihood diversification and migration) with what outcomes? Of particular interest in this framework are the institutional processes (embedded in a matrix of formal and informal institutions and organisations) which mediate the ability to carry out such strategies and to achieve (or not) such outcomes" (Scoones, 1988, p3).

The paper follows this structure. A short account of the development in the case study region is followed by the analysis of the vulnerability context, which subsequently leads to a discussion of the various livelihood resources available to farmers. Then the institutional processes and organisational structures in the development of the eco-region are described. Concluding to this section the portfolio of livelihood strategies pursued is presented.

The development of the "Eco-region Hohe Tauern"

As early as 1989 a farmer in the region of Pinzgau, in the regional state of Salzburg, started to think how to battle the declining market share for beef of the traditional indigenous "Pinzgauer" breed. In an interview with me he related his ideas using the following picture: *"If a spring crops up in the mountains the water flows downwards to the valley, merges with a creek, runs into the river Salzach and finally the Danube carries the water to the Black Sea. There the pristine spring water cannot be distinguished from the other any more. On the market it is the same... If it is not visible anymore you will vanish...and it is not recognized, if you do not have a brand"*.

He started to group likeminded farmers around him and approached several butchers to be partners in a regional marketing project "Pinzgauer Naturprodukte". They started to sell beef out of suckling cow production regionally through the outlets of a partner butcher. The project was quite successful and found the interest of the management of the "National Park Hohe Tauern". They invited the initiator of the project to their symposia and congresses. With their help a consultancy office was approached to

develop an integrated program for the entire region. The resulting project proposal mentioned the idea of an “ecological regional development” for the first time. The project, however, was never implemented due to lack of interest of other key actors in the region, especially in the tourist sector.

The regional chamber of agriculture wanted to copy the economic success of the “Pinzgauer Naturprodukte” and supported a new project, which also tried to market beef regionally but without restricting it to a certain breed. Both projects rivalled for public funds to set up a slaughterhouse.

Finally the chamber in 1994 installed a working group called “ARGE Nationalparkregion Hohe Tauern”, which tried to facilitate between the two projects and to integrate also the activities of other existing initiatives, as well as of the regional dairy coop and the breeders association under a common frame. The basic idea was to develop a common strategy for regional marketing of all agricultural products. The National Park management was first reluctant to co-operate with the “ARGE Nationalparkregion Hohe Tauern” and wanted to restrict the use of the national park logo to organic products only. In the meantime the “Pinzgauer Naturprodukte”, with 80 farmers as members, had fully converted to organic. Parallel to this the biggest retailer chain in Austria, Billa/Rewe had started the first organic brand in the supermarket. They made contracts with the regional dairy and the beef producers. After Austria’s accession to the EU in 1995 the number of organic farms in the region increased dramatically. So the “ARGE Nationalparkregion Hohe Tauern” decided to switch their strategy to promoting only organic production.

From 1997 onward the retailer used the image of the National Park to promote heavily his organic line of dairy and meat products. He also started to use the term “Bioregion Hohe Tauern” for the promotion of his organic brand “Ja!Natürlich”. This brand is now finding the highest consumer recognition of all organic brands in Austria and has also the highest market share of all organic brands in supermarkets.

Analysis according to the framework of Sustainable Rural Livelihoods

Context

The vulnerability context of farming in the mountainous regions of Austria is characterised by a strong decrease of fulltime farming over the last generation (Penz, 1997). As traditional farming practices (dairy farming, production of breeding stock), are labour intensive, farm succession is rather insecure if the labour input, required in combination with off farm employment, is not reduced. This change to more extensive forms of production, however, often conflicts with the traditional ways of measuring success within the farming community. Farmers are therefore reluctant to change their production patterns (Schermer, 1999).

In the view of the long term trends of market development since the 2nd world war, mountain farmers found themselves increasingly left behind in the competition with more advantaged areas. Therefore already as early as in the late 70ies innovative farmers started to diversify their livelihood strategies using pluriactivity like on farm holidays, processing on farm and direct marketing (Scheer, 1989). Also organic farming was perceived as an option for diversification. These innovative strategies were finally even supported by the then federal agricultural minister Josef Riegler who, towards the end of the 80ies, published a manifest of “eco-social agricultural policy” (Regenärmel and Schmid, 1989). In the beginning of the 90ies these ideas served as a guideline in the preparation of Austria’s accession to the EU. Subsidies for organic farming were introduced and agro-environmental programs designed, which were compatible with EU-legislation.

Still the EU-accession in 1995 can be termed a “shock” as it changed the system of agricultural markets and support policies fundamentally, which effected an immediate price decline. Market prices for most

agricultural commodities dropped to about half. This decrease in market revenue was made up by an increase of public payments out of an agro-environmental scheme, which was horizontally applied all over Austria. Organic farming receives the highest payments in the frame of the agro-environmental scheme. Therefore also organic farming was advocated in parts of the mountainous area as a strategy to fight the declining price situation (Schermer, 2003b).

This shift of farmers' tasks from "production to protection" in the public expectation raised an insecurity of farmers on their role in society. In 2001 in the mountainous area of Austria 74% of the total farm household income came from farming and forestry activities. But this figure includes also public transfer payments. The public transfers amounted up to 54% of the total income. The agro-environmental program contributes about 38% to these public payments and another 28% are provided as special payments to alleviate the particular difficulties of mountain farming (BMLFUW, 2002). This means that 66% of the transfer payments or over 35% of the total farm income is not connected to market production. This portion makes up already for the major part of the income as only about 20% is out of product sales and another 26% is contributed by off farm employment. The rest are product related transfer payments, which will be further reduced by the CAP reform. The high share of the income, which is not connected to market or employment activities together with increasing regulations on the farming practices, posed a motivational problem to farmers (Schermer, 2000).

This general context of vulnerability is also the background of the case study region. The region is located in the alpine part of Austria with steep slopes and small holdings. Production is limited to grassland farming. Farmers are predominantly engaged with dairy and beef production also sheep breeding has a major importance. Also the milk processing structures were rather weak. The regional dairy co-operative was believed to be too small under EU conditions.

Livelihood resources

The economy of the region is focussed on tourism. The national park "Hohe Tauern", the biggest national park of Austria, is of high importance for tourism development. The region is of outstanding natural beauty. When the importance of agriculture declined farmers either found employment in tourism or started themselves tourist activities like offering on farm holidays. The proportion of organic farmers reached about 50% in the region. This increase was also a reaction on declining market revenues as organic farming benefited from public transfer payments. After the accession to the EU also their development programs for less favoured regions became available. The region was included as an Objective 5b region and participated also in the LEADER program. This paved the way for financial assistance of small scale initiatives.

Some innovative projects had started as early as 1979 with the small scale processing and direct marketing of mutton. Also the "Pinzgauer Naturprodukte" started already in the late 80ies. There were still some small scale butchers to cooperate with and the farming community tried to keep the regional dairy coop independent.

Farmers' horizontal networks were already quite dense before. Networks to outside of the agricultural sector were built up primarily by the innovative initiatives already mentioned. The majority of traditional farmers were rather reluctant to engage in new relationships, especially towards the National Park. These farmers had even formed a "protection association" against possible restrictions coming from the national park management.

Also the LEADER program had an impact on the social capital of the farming society. The LEADER-Initiative which was attached to the "ARGE Nationalparkregion Hohe Tauern" created a closer co-operation between the initiatives. They also provided an institutional link to the national park management.

Institutional processes and organisational structures

The institutional arrangements for rural development are dominated by the regional branch of the Chamber of Agriculture. In Austria the Chamber of Agriculture is a legal entity, where all farmers are *ex lege* members. This organisation is representing the farmers' interests towards the wider society, organises the extension services and is increasingly involved in the administration of subsidies and agro-environmental programs.

In the case study region the Chamber has also to deal with the interests of the National Park management, on one hand supporting farmers' interests against restrictions imposed and on the other hand proposing an environmental sound farming system. The Chamber is therefore supporting the "protection association" as well as the "ARGE Nationalparkregion Hohe Tauern". The latter group is also acting as a development agency for the administration of the LEADER-funds.

In the administration of the agro-environmental program the Chamber of Agriculture has an important role to provide farmers with access to public transfer payments. Almost all farmers are participating in the agro-environmental program (ÖPUL) and about 50 % of the farms are certified organic. This is the highest percentage of all regions in Austria. Most of the organic farms are organised under the organic farmers association "Bio-Ernte Austria", who is also setting up marketing projects. There are no other organic farming associations active in the area.

Traditionally marketing is dominated by co-operative structures. The milk market is served by the regional dairy coop and livestock market is managed by the breeders association. The small initiatives for regional beef and mutton marketing were partly founded to provide an alternative to these structures, which were perceived as inefficient.

In 1994 the dairy coop was discussing to merge with a bigger one to provide economically viable structures for the accession to the EU. The members, however, voted for independence, without a clear idea how to go about.

At this stage another big player entered the scene. The biggest retailer chain in Austria Billa/Rewe had decided to start an organic brand in their supermarkets. A pioneering organic trader had developed a concept for organic in the supermarket and had offered it to various retailers. Billa/Rewe had finally shown interest and offered the expert a consultancy position to coordinate their organic brand launched under the name of "Ja!Natürlich" (in English: yes!naturally). They initially focussed on dairy products and meat as there were established structures and the collection and processing was already organised. So the additional transaction costs could be kept low. He offered the dairy coop to buy their organic products. Contractual bindings prohibited the sale of organic products to other retailers. As a high percentage of farmers had decided to convert to organic due to the environmental payments offered, it was profitable to start an organic line. At the same time this provided to the organic farmers new marketing opportunities. This helped them to base their self esteem not only on environmental transfer payments, but also on the recognition of their products on the market.

"Ja!Natürlich" furthermore demanded farmers to comply with the standards of Austrias' major organic farmers association "Bio-Ernte Austria". Therefore also farmers, who had initially only participated in the environmental program under the regulation of the "Codex Alimentarius", joined the organic movement and were thus integrated into the organic institutional system.

Finally "Ja!Natürlich" teamed up with the national Park Management. They started to use the positive image of the region around Austrias prime National Park with the term "Bioregion" (eco-region) for his promotion. To foster consumer relations they also promoted holidays on organic farms through their own travel agency. This helped to improve, albeit partially, the image of the National Park among farmers.

These strong alliances in favour of organic farming prompted eventually also the Chamber of Agriculture and the “ARGE Nationalpark Hohe Tauern” to switch to promote exclusively organic production. They supported also financially the activities of “Ja!Natürlich”, like the promotion of holidays on organic farms in a special catalogue or a competition for awards as “Ja!Natürlich” organic model farms.

Livelihood strategies

There are strong limitations to the change of practices in farming systems of mountainous areas under ecological conditions. Intensification of land husbandry comes soon to its limits. Extensification of land use is perceived as counterproductive for tourist development. Intensification of cattle breeding is practised mainly by conventional farmers, boosting the milk yields with concentrate feed. At the moment this does not really raise the economic viability of farms, rather than the social status within the farming community. Abandonment of farming and migration to towns is less pronounced in Austria than in other disadvantaged regions of the Alps mainly due to the possibilities of pluriactivity. Additional income comes especially from tourism, either through self employed activities like offering holidays on farm, or through employment in tourist enterprises. In the case of winter tourism this coincides with slack periods in the seasonal labour calendar of farming. Diversification thus provides the main strategy to sustain farming (Dax et al., 1995).

The concept of the eco-region assists this strategy in many ways:

- It provides a market for labour extensive products like beef from suckling cow production systems.
- It helped the farmers to rely not only on environmental transfer payments but to maintain also production functions. This is important for the self esteem of farmers.
- Innovative activities are often risky by nature. The eco-region provides a network to reduce individual risk.
- Marketing into mainstream channels via conventional processing and logistic structures relieved the farmers from additional labour requirements often associated with innovative activities. Free labour capacities can often be used more profitably in off farm employment.
- The co-operation with the retailer chain resulted also in a promotion of holidays on organic farms in the region and thus contributes to additional income.

Effects on livelihood and sustainability

The development of the eco-region creates new possibilities for the farmers. It offers also price premiums for the producers. As a considerable density of organic farms was achieved, conventional processing structures could be used, which kept the additional transaction costs for processing and logistics low. Therefore also in a competitive situation, where all retailer chains have established their own brands, these premiums could be sustained.

The eco-region had also effects on the relations between the economic sectors. While traditionally the strategies were focussed on the horizontal networks within the farming community and some vertical alliances into the processing sector using co-operative structures, now new links were forged into the region and along the supply chain.

Within the region it is mainly the national park, which has a potential to shape the future economic development of the region. The image of pristine nature can be used by tourism, which is the main industry of the region, but it enhances also trust of consumers into regional products in times of food scandals. This needs a compatible form of agriculture. Organic farming, rooted in the traditional ways of land husbandry, which had shaped the cultural landscape historically, can provide this.

“Only a landscape, that is able to sell its produce, will survive”. According to this slogan the maintenance of landscapes in the present condition cannot be decoupled from agricultural production. Agro-environmental programs need a market component to be viable in the long run. Especially the formation of contractual guided strategic alliances along the supply chain provides a certain security for medium term planning horizons.

However, there are also some negative aspects and potential dangers to be mentioned: The retailer gained a powerful key position. He used his market power to force the dairy into contracts guaranteeing exclusive supply. The whole marketing situation is dominated by one player and this is creating a strong dependency for the farmers. As the products are sold under the brand of a retailer in principle the supplying region would be exchangeable. There is a concrete danger that this could happen in the near future if, after the EU enlargement organic producers from accession countries would offer products cheaper. Moreover there was a strong relation of personal trust to the central person behind “Ja!Natürlich”. Several interview partners confirmed, that he had developed a strong personal affection to the region and that he is crucial to prevent a change to another region. Now, in summer 2003, this central person has left the company. It will be interesting to follow up the future developments.

Conclusions

The case study shows that the concept of eco-regions provides a range of improvements to the livelihood of small organic farms in lagging regions. Moreover it allows forging new alliances, which can help to extend the philosophy of sustainability inherent to organic farming also to other actors and sectors in the region. Thus it provides a frame for a territorial application of the principles of organic farming.

The main danger in the specific case analysed is, that the idea is “hijacked” by a powerful market partner, who uses the organic movement for his purposes. In other regions the organic farmers have tried therefore to establish cooperative producer brands. This strategy seems to be successful in cases where there is a partner on the retail sector who has not yet developed an own organic brand. Especially smaller family based supermarket chains with a strong regional focus are potential allies. They need to differentiate themselves from the big chains on the market and can use the image of a regional producer brand to increase even more the credibility of their products. Another strategy is to supplement marketing through the big retailer chains with direct marketing activities.

In addition to these power struggles of market partners and their implications on the sustainability of livelihood strategies, the rural livelihood framework draws the attention to the various forms of capitals as assets for the development of eco-regions and the institutional mediation processes involved.

In general, different factors contribute to the establishment an eco-region. A preliminary list derived from this case study results and other comparative studies (Schermer, 2003a) includes the following:

- A positive image of the region. This builds mainly on the natural features of the region.
- A certain importance of organic farming within the regional farming society. This importance is shown by the percentage of organic farmers, but also by their dynamic development and their activities.
- The united appearance of the organic producer associations, especially concerning marketing strategies. Networking structures between organic marketing initiatives are also of major importance to build up links to regional development institutions.
- The integration of the organic farmers into the conventional agricultural institutions. This safeguards the cooperation of the institutional level, which is crucial for the long term success.

- Partners, who can, at least potentially, benefit from the idea. This is necessary in order to create “win-win situations” with other actors in the region, as well as along the supply chain. Such alliances again can (re)inforce the support of the idea by the agricultural institutions.

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