

Values and value conflicts in organic farming — Images and symbolic ideas as starting point for strategic planning in advisory and research work

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Abstract: Values and value conflicts play an important role in organic but also in non-organic farming. In discussions about the future way to go unconscious systems in human behaviour should be taken into account. Images and symbols are commonly used in marketing but are not really explored as a source for ethical orientation and strategic planning for farmers, advisors and researchers. Experiences with the use pictures in discussions with farmers and researchers and in advisory work (example of Bioland) about desirable sustainable futures will be reported. A further developed methodology and systematic, how to use pictures, is proposed.

Keywords: pictures, images, symbols, strategic planning, advisory work, organic farming

Introduction

Farmers today are in a permanent adaptation process. However the daily work and the high workload often does not allow to find enough time to reflect about the mid- and long-term future of the farm. Should the farm be developed towards more diversification or become more specialised? Which way to go — does it really suit and satisfy me and my family? There are many questions, for which the farmers search for answers and which need a more fundamental orientation and more strategic planning processes. In fact it would be a task of advisory services to support farmers in this reflection and reorientation process. But for advisors it is quite challenging to give the right support for such a farm transition process. It is much easier to give technical advice than to offer a socio-economic advice for an integrated whole farm development. The advisory service of Bioland has tried to develop more holistic advisory methods to support farmers in strategic management. One of the instruments used was an image-based methodology developed to help farmers and their partners (and families) in finding their personal aims and strategic goals.

This image-based methodology was further developed to facilitate and inspire discussions about desirable and more value-based future scenarios and transition pathways for (organic) agriculture, involving not only advisors and farmers but also researchers and other chain actors. First experiences are reported and potentials and limitations of such a methodology are discussed.

Experiences with an image-based method in advisory and research work

How can images and symbolic ideas be used in advisory work and socio-economic research?

a) Bioland strategic set of pictures for strategic planning

The advisory service of the Bioland association in Germany had in the past the opportunity to participate in a project with the vTI Research institution in Braunschweig on strategic planning for farms. The key features for the farmers in this pilot project were the farm development, quality of life, cooperation, the economic basis for living and the personal development perspective.

One of the experiences was: with such an offer for strategic planning, only farmers were reached, which were already very active and open to new challenges. However, a large part of farmers, which

are not “quick adapters” are not reached. The same experiences have been made by other advisory services, which offered since several years special training and coaching programmes for entrepreneurship.

A main focus of the mentioned project was the development of a methodology for strategic planning of farms. A typology has been developed to better recognize the strategic orientations of farmers (e.g. as diversifier, part-diversifier, integrator/concentrator or “specialisor”), taking also other personal behavioural typologies into account. The experiences showed that the most important factor for strategic orientation is the personality of the farm manager (including his/her partner and family) with his/her specific goals, personal interests, skills and knowledge. External factors like size of the farm, nearness to the market or to customers have a limited importance. But how can an advisor take such personal orientations sufficiently into consideration, when being involved in a strategic farm planning process?

One of the key factors for successful advisory work is to create an inspiring atmosphere to think about farming futures or a “strategic mood” (term used by Torben Ulf Larsen, Senior Advisor of DAAS, Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, National Centre in Aarhus). It is important to know how farmers (and their partners) see themselves and their way for developing the farm and the personal quality of life. Instead of using a questionnaire, which has shown to be too complicated and too intellectual, good experiences were made by using a set of pictures to start the farm planning process. Instead of asking questions on the personal objectives, the farm manager, usually together with his/her partner (and sometimes 4-5 people of the family) could choose five pictures, which express current personal values and objectives of farmers, which could be a motor (or activator) for change.

These pictures have been searched using a list of ca. 60 goals and values, which were expressed by a group of pilot-farms (in the farmer’s language!). The set of pictures was adapted to the particularities of different regions.

Table 1. Bioland set of verbalised images and goals for strategic planning of farms.

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Personal values and goals | Time for the family Time for leisure/hobbies/for myself Engagement in associations Harmony in family and farm Clear separation farm/family Alternative lifestyle Being independent Working with other in a community Pleasure in farming | Diversity and variation Appropriate standards of living New challenges/new fields Pleasure with experiments Good image of the farm/recognition Good reputation in the public Financial independence/liberty Prestige objects/status symbols |
| Farm goals and values | Use of modern techniques Low input use Simple farm organisation Diversity on the farm Quality and professionalism Being a pioneer Being a pilot farm | Growing farm (size, animals) Close/direct contact to consumers Concentration on production Space for economic activities Economically successful Long-term farm maintenance Good farm climate |
| Environmental goals | Good relationship Help collaborators to qualify Working with other persons | Working within farm cooperation Building up and maintain networks |
| Societal goals | Biodiversity/species diversity Diversified landscape Protection of soils, water, air Working with ecological cycles Animal welfare | Production of healthy food Maintenance of working places Create added value in the region Global responsibility |
| Spiritual values and goals | Christian/other religious values Maintain gods creation | Anthroposophy |

To start a long-term and strategic planning it is important to stimulate that the farmer (and his/her family/community partners) feel, see and talk about, what for them is important, when they are thinking about their future. What should be their emphasis and main focus in the next years? With such verbalised picture-cards this can be achieved.

The set of cards is used usually in three rounds. First the cards, which the farmer (and his/her partner) did not like were put aside, then the most preferable cards with the most important values and goals had to be selected and afterwards the second important ones. The farmer (and his/her partner) were asked to talk about the 3-5 priority cards and images related to their current goals (and more concrete objectives) regarding the future of the farm and their family. The most important effect is telling his/her thoughts to his/her partners in the family or farm team. The advisor can ask questions to clarify unclear statements.

After this image-based exploration phase with the farmer and his/her family, which lead to the identification of current personal goals, the Bioland advisors were usually making an economic analysis for the farm based on the bookkeeping results, which was followed by a simplified SWOT analysis. After knowing the personal goals and having an overview of the status of the farm and client the advisor developed a strategic compass. This compass showed the different directions and options of the farm development. Afterwards the farm received a strategic report, which contained also elements of a business plan.

After one year an evaluation of the methodology has been made by Bioland with 12 involved advisors. The use of the set of images in the advisory work was evaluated positively, whereas the SWOT analysis and questionnaires often showed to be too complicated. (Plagge & Zander, 2008; Plagge et al., 2009).

In the further promotion of the Bioland advisory service the terms “coaching” and “strategic planning” are not used, in order to avoid the use of too abstract terms and hereby also reducing barriers to participate. The advisory programme is now called *“For more clarity, motivation and quality of life – an overall inventory of the farm”*.

How time-demanding and costly is such a service? The special strategic farm planning requires ca. 6-8 hours per farm (3-4 hours on the farm and 2-3 hours for preparation and the report), which corresponds to costs of ca. 600-800 Euros for the whole advisory package. It could be an option that this kind of special advisory service could be financed by regional authorities, e.g. as kind of pilot-projects.

If the strategic planning was successful, often farmers were asking afterwards for much more technical advice depending on the farm main branches and future plans according to the clarified or new orientation.

b) Further developed set of images for discussion with researchers and organic farming community

The Research Institute for Organic Agriculture (FiBL) agreed with Bioland to look for ideas, how the picture card advisory method may be developed further. One step to this purpose was to test the work with images in a workshop with researchers, farmers and advisors at the German Scientific Conference on Organic Agriculture (WiTa09) in Zurich in February 2009 (Mayer et al., 2009).

The main goals of the workshop were:

- to verify and discuss if the basic ideas, principles and guiding images of the pioneers in organic farming still can serve as guidance and carrying principles for the future development of (organic) farming;
- to search in a group process for present guiding images for future farming, be they linked with or disconnected from the images of the pioneers;
- to test if symbolic images can help to find research questions;
- to get a feedback if the use of more image-based methodologies in socio-economic research work has a potential for further development.

Both the Bioland set as well as a new set developed by Schmid and Patzel have been used, which included more symbolic images. As a “warming up”, the participants were confronted with quotations from pioneers of organic farming, showing some of their guiding symbols, cultural context and their ethical orientation.

Examples for images and ideas which may have also a symbolic function and meaning, were: the *farm organism* idea (Rudolf Steiner, founder of the bio-dynamic movement), the *circle of the living substance* (Hans-Peter Rusch), the notion of *mother earth* (Mina Hofstetter, Sir Albert Howard and others), etc.

The discussion showed that typically three different attitudes of the participants:

1. Some of the basic ideas, principles and the related (inner) images of the pioneers are also perceived as a helpful guidance for the own pathway. There is a longing for reconnection to the own origin.
2. The pioneer ideas, principles and images were rejected and even contested. One is committed to organic agriculture not because of, but despite of them. But there is interest for other guiding images, which are personally acquired.
3. There is a loose range of value-loaded ideas and inner images, where the pioneer ideas and images occur amongst others — rather incoherently, but open.

In the WiTa-Workshop in Zürich in 2009 also a set of pictures without any explaining or interpreting captions were used. Participants did individually search a few pictures, which they liked most for showing desirable futures for farming. These helped to find other participants to find in a small group (2-4 people). The different small groups had to make spontaneously a poster with their pictures and to explain to the others their meaning and symbolic content of the images. This allowed visualising and verbalising values and also to a limited extent valuing conflicts.

The work with the pictures showed a surprising movement and first results after a short time. The intrinsic ambivalence and different possibilities to interpret symbolic images lead to open up in a good way clarifying discussions about central meanings of agricultural work.

The analysis of the picture composition revealed that much more pictures without caption, which were not illustrating a given meaning, have been used: mainly such pictures inviting the viewer to perceive them as symbols. In Figure 1 and 2 examples of picture compositions and interpretations are given.



Figure 1. Image composition from the WiTa09 workshop in Zürich with researchers, farmers and advisors on “carrying” future images for organic farming.

Participants expressed associations and interpretations, e.g., linking young grape leaves with “catching light and life”, or commenting pigs and chains by “game in difficult time”. Other themes which came up were enjoyment of life, aesthetics, pragmatism, harmonious relationships, social inclusion and care, linking respect and astonishment with analytic thinking, etc.



Figure 2. Picture compositions from the WiTa09 workshop in Zürich with researchers, farmers and advisors on “carrying” future images for organic farming

In the discussion, after working with the picture collection, the participating researchers, farmers and advisors showed a strong interest to use images in discussions about the future orientation of (organic) agriculture. This could help to better identify underlying structures of explicit values and desirable images for the future, in contrast to non-desirable images.

For the further development of the Bioland visual card set, we learned that the inclusion of more symbolic images, ordered following archetypal structures, could enrich the scope of the method — in recognition that this raises the requirements for their applicants.

Discussion

There are several interesting questions, which came up, when working in different groups with an image-based methodology.

What skills and knowledge are needed to work with images?

To work with images, generally to identify and interpret symbols, is normally not a subject of education and training. Therefore it is unrealistic to introduce such an approach in form of a routine applied advisory tool. The use of such a method, as the set of images of Bioland, is quite challenging for advisors as this requests a high personal competence and life experience. The method has an interesting potential, but the success of its application is very much influenced by the personality of the advisor. This limits naturally the use of such a tool, although this could be supported with a user manual, which can give some more guidance how to use the set. The big potential of this approach is, that images can symbolise and “show in a nutshell”, what is important for an individual’s or farm’s

development. Images, at the right time at the right place, can “say more than thousand words”, or bring into the play, what otherwise would have remained mute.

How to avoid the misuse of image-based methodologies?

The risk that images are accidentally misused in the advisory work exists. Only if an image is or will be not limited to just one way of interpretation by the advisor or by society, it can fully unfold its inspiring potential and become and remain a living symbol for the individual. Awareness to the ambiguity and to the subjective variability of interpretations and symbolic meanings of pictures and images is important when working with them.

What are appropriate pictures?

As mentioned above, the pictures of the Bioland set are always connected with a special wording indicating a specific meaning. The reason is that these pictures were chosen as *illustrations* for verbalized values. The underlying idea, to choose images as representatives for qualitative axes of value systems and strategic options, has proven its worth. A use of images without any hold anticipation of their meaning, can open up more potentials of this method. Furthermore, the integration of pictures into the set, whose “content” may be strongly rejected, may help to clarify individual mental landscapes.

Further work has to be done concerning the classification of the images and the interpretative scheme, e.g., concerning:

- pictures with more technical message and such with are rather taken as symbols;
- pictures which show former or current practises and others which seem futuristic;
- addressing different dimensions of development as materialistic versus spiritual values, etc.

Values and value conflict areas

Value and value conflicts play an important role in organic (but also in non-organic farming (Padel et al., 2009). Conflicts often are not addressed sufficiently by words. But in order to indicate potential personal value conflicts, suitable images may be found, which can help to make conflicts more conscious (e.g. diversification might create too much workload).

Conclusions

To conclude, the integration of such an image-based methodological tool in advisory work showed many advantages. Each advisory work should in fact contribute to a positive change. This is only possible if there is a motivation to change something. It is important for the farmer and the advisor to know more about these motivations for change. If an advisor or advisory team can base his/their work on such an inventory, more and consciously based on personal values and goals, it is much easier to “accompany“ the farm persons and families in their process of change and later to give more specialised (technical) advice.

A limitation of the method is that high requirements are needed for this kind of advisory work. Advisors should have personal experience with *values and fallacies* in confronting symbolic images, as well as good knowledge and experiences with process-based advisory work and coaching. It would be desirable that such an advisor can use at least 5-20 times the methodology per year and that they should be regularly trained and have supervision.

For researchers it could be inspiring and helpful to think more systematically about the inclusion of symbolic images in their own working process and in publications, which are addressing future development for agriculture. A symbolic image can be used to transport important messages; sometimes in a much better way than with a lot of words.

In times were authentic inner orienting images often don't have the chance to surface, and visual communication is often misleading or not realizing its positive potential, single or group work with our mental world of images can make constructive contributions.

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