

Organic plus – (re)politisation of the food sector? Reflections on two case studies

Sonja Petrovics^a, Nicoleta Chioncel^b, Sandra Karner^b and Irmi Salzer^a

^aÖBV-Via Campesina Austria, sonja.petrovics@viacampesina.at, irmi.salzer@viacampesina.at, Mariahilferstraße 89/22, A-1060 Wien, Austria

^bInter-University Research Center on Technology, Work and Culture (IFZ), karner@ifz.tugraz.at, chioncel@ifz.tugraz.at, Schloegelgasse 2, A-8010 Graz, Austria

Abstract: *In the late 1970s, the first agricultural projects have been developed in Austria, aiming at supporting farmers' livelihoods in remote and disadvantaged regions. Embedded in a broader process (Endogenous Regional Development), economic aspects were combined with organic farming, social, cultural and ecological issues. This paper reflects on two of these early initiatives (BERSTA and EVI), their underlying ideas, history and present practices. Since these early days, the organic market in Austria has been growing and a process of concentration has increased competition especially for farmers' initiatives and small enterprises. An emphasis on additional criteria beyond organic standards ('organic plus') could serve as a tool for differentiation from the conventionalised organic market. However, EVI and BERSTA are critical about using such features as a marketing strategy. Instead – according to their understanding of politics – they try to practice other, informal ways of communicating 'organic plus' to consumers and of maintaining values within their networks. We argue that this is based on their perception of a political dimension of food, which had already been formulated in their beginnings. In the course of EVI's and BERSTA's professionalisation, most of the initial core ideas were maintained (held on to). Crucial to that were specific organisational structures, in addition to the personal commitment of people involved. Likewise, 'values' are communicated to consumers independently from formal certification. These strategies can be linked with recent discussions about food democracy and food sovereignty, and contribute to a political dimension in the discussion about 'organic plus'.*

Keywords: *organics, consumer-producer networks, food democracy, food sovereignty*

Introduction

Organic production, processing and procurement have a rather long tradition in Austria and are often organised in networks comprising different forms of co-operative activities. Initiatives in this area take the shape of many different forms such as co-operatives, associations, forms of community supported agriculture (CSA), farmers-business cooperations or trading companies. Right from the beginning, most of these initiatives combined economic with ecological, social and cultural issues (Rohrmoser, 2004). Paralell to this, a new paradigm of Regional Development evolved in Austria in the late 1970s. Known later on as 'Endogenous Regional Development', this movement aimed at giving value to disadvantaged rural regions in the sense of supporting farmers' livelihoods through direct marketing, but also by providing educational work, promoting organic farming and supporting self-governed organisation. The foundation of the two initiatives which this article draws on, the organic producer-consumer co-operative BERSTA and the organic producer-consumer association EVI, was embedded in such a process of Endogenous Regional Development.

One of the initiatives' success factors and, at the same time, one of the motives for their foundation was the lack of supply of urban areas with organic products in the beginning of the 1980s. Since then, the organic market in Austria has developed considerably. The total turnover of organic products in 2006 was an estimated 590 million EUR (Lebensmittelbericht 2008). Supermarket chains entered the market with their own organic brands. In Austria, the three largest chains, the "Rewe" group (Billa, Bipa, Penny, Merkur), „Spar“ and the discounter „Hofer“ (Aldi), already hold 86% of market shares in the organic market (Scherrer, 2007:40f). Meanwhile, 25 supermarkets in Austria are selling exclusively organic products, offering up to 9000 products (Liebig, 2007:34) At the same time,

traditional and direct forms of the sale of (not just) organic products, such as direct marketing and farmers markets in Austria, have seen a decline in turnover and sales during the past years (Lebensmittelbericht, 2008; Schermer, 2008). This shift in organic retail structures results in considerable competition, especially for farmers' initiatives and small or medium scale enterprises dealing in organic food. Accordingly, there is a need for small and medium scale retailers to find new strategies to differentiate themselves from members of the 'large scale organic sector' in order to keep their market shares.

Lately, the term 'organic plus' was introduced to describe the use of additional criteria that go beyond European organic standards (EC 834/2007), as a tool to stand out from the increasingly conventionalised organic market. Recent discussions and research projects on this trend revealed that, along with 'organic plus' as a marketing strategy, several issues need to be raised. Firstly, there seems to be an issue with certification as a formal form of communicating the products' 'organic plus' features to consumers. Some of these features are based on specific 'values' and 'beliefs' combined with organic agriculture and can not easily be implemented in a certification process, which needs clear pass/fail criteria (Padel and Röcklingsberg, 2009). Additionally, certification itself is a contested issue. Some authors raise criticism, arguing that the surplus gained is mainly used to finance the administrative bodies which a certification process demands and that the definition of standards is, if nothing else, a matter of creating and defending market shares by powerful stakeholders (Mutersbaugh, 2005). Secondly, there seems to be a certain caution related to the cooptation of 'values' to serve as a mere marketing strategy, that turns 'regional' and 'fair' into commodities itself (Johnston et al., 2009) and 'ethical consumption' into a bourgeoisie practice (Behr and Bolyos, 2008). Thus, there are initiatives which even reject the usage of 'organic plus' features as marketing strategy (Gössinger and Freyer 2009).

The article aims at reflecting on the cases of BERSTA and EVI in regard to the recent discussion of 'organic plus' as marketing strategy, focusing on the question in what the specific attitudes of the initiative are rooted, in which way they were adopted in the course of professionalisation and what recent ideas the initiatives share about communicating these attitudes to consumers. First, we will describe the circumstances that led to the initiatives' foundation and the broader processes they were embedded in. We believe that these processes served as a basis for developing strong core ideas, most of which are, as we will show in the second part, still part of their practical behaviour and a main reason for the initiatives' rather long existence. Based on the reflection on the changes of the organisational structures, we will argue that 'professionalisation' does not automatically lead to 'conventionalisation'. Finally, we will highlight the strategies and practices the initiatives use to communicate their 'organic plus' features to consumers. From our point of view, their strategies could be linked with recent discussions about food democracy and food sovereignty which focus on the democratisation of the agro-food system, the right to food and solidarity among producers and consumers (Patel, 2009; Hassanein, 2003). These approaches are demanding social and environmental conditions and mechanisms for the control of food production, processing and procurement and, thus, are necessarily leading to a 'politicisation of food' (Forster, 2008). From this point of view 'organic plus' can be understood as a chance to (re)-politicise food.

Methods

The material presented in this article is based on the co-operative research project 'FAAN – Facilitating Alternative Agro-Food Networks: a Stakeholders' Perspective on Research Needs' (2008-2010) funded under the European Community's Seventh Framework. The case studies EVI and BERSTA were part of the empirical work conducted within FAAN. For the case studies, EVI and BERSTA data was collected in one exploratory expert interview, followed by five semi-structured qualitative interviews with former and current members of the initiatives, which were conducted in December 2008 and January 2009. Three interviews were recorded and transcribed. Three interviewees refused recording and the interviewers took notes. Further sources for the collection of information related to the case studies include websites, press releases, previous studies, protocols,

mission statements and personal correspondents. In February 2009, a focus group discussion on the topic of 'new and old forms of producer-consumer co-operatives' was carried out in order to provide additional data and to contextualise and/or verify first findings from the interviews. 10 members of consumer-producer co-operatives participated in the focus group discussion, 5 of them from the initiatives BERSTA and EVI, five from two more recently founded initiatives in Vienna and Upper Austria. The focus group discussion was recorded and partly transcribed. The documentation report of the focus group was commented and verified by the participants.

Case studies

Exploring the roots – values and organisational structure in the foundation phase

The case studies which this article is based on are both located in Lower Austria. BERSTA was founded in June 1980 as a producer-consumer co-operative comprising organic farmers in the Region Waldviertel in the northern part of Lower Austria and a group of consumers in Vienna. The co-operative bought a shop in Vienna and used it to sell farmer's products to the co-operative's consumer members but also to consumers outside of the co-operative. The shop was managed by the consumers. EVI was founded in the same year, following BERSTA's example. EVI comprised a group of farmers located in Lower Austria and a group of consumers from St.Pölten, the capital of Lower Austria, who chose the legal form of association for their initiative. EVI bought a shop in St.Pölten, likewise managed by the association's consumer members. Especially in the beginning, work in the shops was based on a voluntary basis in both cases and the initiatives organised several side-line activities such as newsletters, information events or discussion groups.

The foundation of BERSTA and EVI was grounded in specific circumstances. In the late 1970s Austria's agriculture was facing serious problems. Increasing over-production and a decline in product prices led to onward concentration processes in production. In disadvantaged rural regions, such as the region Waldviertel, where BERSTA and partly EVI farmers are located, this caused a migration of workers to urban areas and severe problems for small farms to earn a living (Rohrmoser, 2004). In the end of the 1970s the deteriorating situation induced a controversial discussion between practitioners, politicians and researchers about the future economic, social and cultural development in rural areas and led to the development of the first agricultural projects, emphasising short supply chains via different forms of direct marketing, on-farm product processing, cooperations between farmers and consumers and organic farming practices.

The implementation of these first agricultural projects – among them EVI and BERSTA - was supported by a new practice of regional development that emerged in Austria at the same time which was subsequently named and conceptualised as 'Endogenous Regional Development'. Its origin was a grass-roots group of committed people on the one hand, working in rural areas to put the new idea about regional development into practice. On the other hand, a broad discussion about the future of agriculture and rural areas began in the political arena; representing a certain 'window of opportunity' as it is put by an involved practitioner in his reflections on these events (Scheer, 2008). This growing consciousness at the political level even resulted in the establishment of new funding schemes and advisory support.

One of the protagonists of 'Endogenous Regional Development' and a co-founder of BERSTA was Toni Rohrmoser. He reflects on his experiences with this new form of regional development in an article about 'Community Work' (Rohrmoser, 2004). In this article he describes the pre-conditions that lead to the foundation of BERSTA. Actually employed as a pastoral worker, Rohrmoser started his work in the Region Waldviertel in 1978. Based on his experiences in development work in southern countries and confronted with the Region's urgent social, cultural, ecological, economic and infrastructural problems, he founded a 'rural working group' (Arbeitskreis Land) comprising mostly young people from the region. The working group organised discussions, raising questions about farmers' livelihoods, education and self-esteem as farmers in disadvantaged areas. He describes the aim of his work as the radical empowerment of citizens of rural area.

At the same time it was obvious to the working group's members, that empowerment could not be successful without an economically viable basis and they discussed the development of agricultural projects which emphasised self-governance, local democracy, mutual aid, strong local networks, solidarity among consumers and producers and organic farming practices. The rural working group engaged with a group of consumers in Vienna that was interested in organic products and the support of farmers' livelihoods via a more direct retail system. This resulted in a first action conducted in cooperation of the rural working group and the consumers in Vienna in 1979: "We hired a van and went from one farm to the next, asking whether the farmers would be interested to sell their potatoes directly to consumers in Vienna. With the potatoes we went to Vienna, sold them and brought the money – much more than they would have gained when selling to a retailer – back to the farmers." (notes taken at the focus group 25.2.2009)

This first action was so successful that the idea of a consumer-producer co-operative was formulated and BERSTA was founded in June 1980 as a cooperative of 17 organic farmers in the Waldviertel region in Lower Austria and a group of consumers from Vienna. The cooperative was given advice on the foundation procedure, in terms of legal, financial and production aspects, by the Mountain Area Action Fund (Bergland-Aktionsfonds) and the Federal Institute for Less Favoured and Mountainous Areas (Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen). In September 1980, BERSTA already had 69 members; 49 consumers and 20 producers. In the beginning they faced problems related to the quality of the processed products, farmers' trust in organic farming practices and logistical issues. Several courses and excursions on the topic of organic farming were held and led to improved cooperation and solidarity amongst the producers.

The association EVI was founded in the same year, following the example of BERSTA, aiming at promoting disadvantaged regions and selling organic products to urban consumers at affordable prices. Another aim of the association was to spread information about conditions in which food was produced and to raise consumers' awareness in that respect. EVI published a newsletter, participated in discussions and public events and organised visits to farms. EVI was organised similar to BERSTA. The association's executive board was, like BERSTA's, formed by consumers and producers. The first shop which sold the farmers' products was opened in St.Pölten and was privately funded. Throughout the first year a lot of work was done on a voluntary basis. After the first year, a shop manager was appointed, but still a high level of voluntary work was needed. BERSTA delivered products to the EVI shops from the beginning and EVI had several 'own' farms.

Related to the discussion about 'organic plus' we can summarise that the foundation of EVI and BERSTA was embedded in a broader process in which strong core ideas about social, cultural and ecological 'values' were passed on to the initiatives. Economically viable agricultural production, processing and marketing of organic products was one of the movement's main aims, which was usually combined with and also served as a vehicle for the promotion of other aims, such as social cohesion and solidarity between producers and consumers, ecological sustainable production methods, local democracy and self-governance. These 'values' were less a matter of the 'individual/private characteristics' of the initiatives, but a vision of a wider societal change and thus part of a political discussion.

Professional but not conventional – values and organisational structures in the 2nd phase

The establishment of BERSTA included aspirations, which were not easy to meet, e.g. good prices for producers and acceptable prices for consumers and self-governance in a process of fast expansion. In 1983 BERSTA's total turnover already was about 30,000 EUR, with 240 members (50 of them producers) and three stores in Vienna. The fast expansion, investments in stores and transportation costs caused a considerable financial crisis. To cope with these problems, the cooperative's share values were raised and, in the subsequent years, two of the stores were sold, the last one in 1985. BERSTA concluded supply contracts with the new shop owners to ensure the delivery of products to Vienna. By this time, BERSTA also tried to find new opportunities for the marketing of their products via other organic food stores. The consumer-producer cooperative gradually turned into a producer

coop and the question arose, whether a cooperative with its huge administrative requirements was still the adequate legal form. As a consumer-producer cooperative BERSTA was not successful and finally dissolved in 1997. In place of the cooperative, the BERSTA farmers association was founded by 25 organic farmers in the Waldviertel region. The business activities (ordering, delivery and marketing) were simultaneously transferred to Sieger&Zottl OHG (BERSTA organic wholesale trading company).

The initiative EVI had similar experiences. In the 1980s two new stores were opened in Zwettl (Waldviertel) and Krems (Wachau). However, this was not due to the financial prosperity of EVI but mainly due to the idealism of EVI's members. The main focus was gradually shifted to the business part of EVI and other activities were reduced. Financial problems in the early 1990s led to the sale of the store in Zwettl. The organisational structures (such as purchase, order, staffing) in EVI St.Pölten and EVI Krems were rearranged in a more efficient way. The issue of liability for the shop's financial situation, an issue discussed from the very beginning, led to the association's dissolution in 2003. The shops in Krems and St.Pölten were split up and are run by different owners today.

The organisational changes in EVI and BESTA over the course of time can be summarised as professionalisation and specialisation. They gradually moved from forms of self-governance relying mainly on voluntary work, towards legal forms of organisation, such as OHG (general partnership) or GmbH (company with limited liability), based on regular employment. In the interviews conducted, former members describe those changes as necessary adjustments. The choice of the legal form of organisation was determined primarily by the matter of liability, as well as the huge administrative effort involved in a self-governed cooperation. Another difficult issue was logistics, as the producers lived far apart from each other and transport costs were considerable. Giving up the principle of self-governance had causes which are less clearly defined and attributed to the relationship between producers and consumers. One issue mentioned in the interviews was the fact that the relationship of trust between producers and consumers, with the latter managing the business relations, was not easy to establish and not always free of conflicts. *"Then there was this problem that as a farmer in Waldviertel you do not have the overview of what is happening in the shop in Vienna. [...] Over the course of time we were looking for a system in which such things as the ones that have happened (conflicts about the shop management, authors note), can be prevented."* (Interview At_12) Table 1 provides an overview of the changes that EVI and BERSTA underwent in the course of their professionalisation. It shows that changes were mainly made in the organisational structures, while the principles of fairness and regional products were kept. Accordingly, we can argue that these changes led to a professionalisation, which was not going hand in hand with conventionalisation in the sense of complete adaptation to the conventional market.

These non-conventional principles, such as fair prices for farmers, fair working conditions for employees and affordable prices for consumers, are based on the people's shared roots and commitment to the initial political ideas of the initiatives. It is important to mention that one of the owners of BERSTA trading company is a former farmer member of the BERSTA co-operative. Thus, the trading company's decision making is not only based on market considerations. However, besides this individual commitment, the interviews revealed that there are specific internal and external structures which support the resilience of 'organic plus' values in both initiatives, irrespective of formal certification.

Table 1. Overview of changes in the course of EVI's and BERSTA's professionalisation

initial practice	recent practice
organic farming and organically produced products (ecological aspects)	
regional products, preference for farmers' products	
fair prices for farmers	
affordable prices for consumers	
fair working conditions for employees	
self-governance and voluntary work	employees
cooperatives/associations	trading companies
multifunctional (delivery and store)	specialisation (delivery or store)

Contracts

Internal structures, in the sense of how co-operation between BERSTA farmers, the BERSTA retailer and the EVI shop is organised, support fair prices for farmers. When the delivery was entrusted to the BERSTA trading company, a contract was set up between the BERSTA association and the trading company to safeguard the association's interests. This contract guarantees a certain 'preferred status' for BERSTA farmers' products within the trading company's business. Even though EVI and BERSTA are increasing their range of products, regional products are still their first choice. One of the EVI managers reports, that it is not always easy to bridge the gap between consumer satisfaction and the regional origin of products. Yet, for the EVI stores, which are not bound to the contract mentioned above, there is a strong commitment to the principle of the regional origin of products and the BERSTA farmers' association.

Power relations

Another supportive internal factor is that BERSTA farmers are organised in an association. The prices for the products are negotiated between the BERSTA farmers and the BERSTA trading company. Thus, the pricing remains transparent for the producers. The basis for collaboration and especially for the pricing process is not a unilateral power relationship. What is important is the fact that the farmers do not end up as solitary counterparts of a trading company, but that they are organised in a registered association.

An un-anonymous market

The fact, that the organic sector in Austria, despite the latest developments of supermarkets entering the organic sector, can be described as a kind of 'community', where most of the actors (retailers, stores, processors) know each other and their practices, is part of a supportive external structure. It was mentioned in the interviews, that this results in an interest in 'getting along with each other' and that BERSTA is following a strategy of cooperation instead of competition. Most of the retailers are either specialised in certain product groups (e.g. vegetables, fruit, processed products or farmers products) or in a spatial sense (eastern and western part of Austria). According to the fact that 'one knows about the practices' of each other, the EVI shop manager explained that they conduct a certain pre-selection for the consumers, in the sense of ordering only from retailers whose practices they consider as sufficiently 'fair'. This suggests that for retailers, store owners and processors in the organic sector in Austria the market is far from anonymous and that this fact has the potential to serve as a certain kind of 'corrective' to the 'conventionalisation trends'.

Communication 'organic-plus' – strategies and questions related to marketing in the recent phase

A focus group discussion with members of EVI, BERSTA and two more recently founded initiatives was conducted in February 2009 in order to identify the current situation and future perspectives of

producer-consumer networks more clearly. In the first step, participants identified challenges within their networks. The representative of EVI formulated the importance of communicating 'values' to consumers as a main challenge for the organic food store (Notes taken at the focus group discussion 25.2.2009). In the second step, this topic was chosen as focus for the group discussion, which is summarised in the following section.

For BERSTA and EVI it is evident that labeling and certification cannot substitute communication to consumers and they reject to use their 'organic-plus' attitudes as part of a formal marketing strategy, introducing specific labels and certification processes. Instead, they share the idea that it is also a responsibility of consumers to be more conscious about the product's origin and the conditions in which it was produced in. Certainly, the EVI store members know that they can not entirely count on the consciousness of consumers, even though EVI has a large number of regular consumers who are familiar with EVI's principles and history. The increasing competition in the organic sector causes severe difficulties to attract new consumers and keep those who are not yet interested in or informed about the specific 'values' or 'organic-plus' criteria that EVI is based on. It was also mentioned in the discussion, that it is necessary to approach consumers and draw them in from where they are, not leaving everything to their own responsibility. The focus group discussion revealed some actions taken, which can be described as a strategy of 'active communication' aiming at involving consumers in a more societal and political discussion about food.

Communicate the responsibility of retailers

A number of wholesale traders are working in the organic sector in Austria. Not all of them are dedicated to support small scale farms, regional products and values such as fair prices and fair working conditions. This aspect is often hidden for consumers. Because of this, EVI produced a leaflet in order to explain their ideas to consumers:

EVI organic food and organic goods runs an organic food and organic goods store in St.Pölten since 1980, by now covering over 500 square meters and including a vegetarian self-service restaurant. The initial motivation of the organic food movement, such as solidarity, diversity and responsible relations to plants, animals, producers, consumers and employees, are still the basis of our work (EVI leaflet, original in German).

During the discussion, the representative of EVI explained that they have an understanding of their work as a form of conscious pre-selection for consumers, a fact which they also wish to communicate to consumers.

Employees

The EVI store places great value on the training and information of their employees about the origin and quality of the products they are selling. The majority of employees have already been working for EVI for several years and they are personally dedicated to the ideas of organic farming and regional products. These efforts ensure that information about products can be passed on to consumers in a very personal way. One of the focus group participants, now working for the BERSTA whole sale trading company, was working in the EVI store St.Pölten for several years. The number of employees is – in relation to the size of the store - rather high, which offers consumers the opportunity to easily ask for advice and, likewise, employees have enough time to engage in a discussion about the differences, qualities and origins of different products.

Guided shop tours

EVI St.Pölten offers guided shop tours for schools. In the discussion it was argued that "*conscious consumption is also a question of lifestyle and priorities*" (documentation of the focus group discussion 25.2.2009) and it seems more feasible to raise consciousness in an early stage.

The idea of a more active involvement of consumers is based on BERSTA's and EVI's initial core ideas. The self-governed structures in the early days of both initiatives did not relate to the consumer as a passive part of the food-network, but rather as an active member. In the course of BERSTA's and EVI's professionalisation, as described above, self-governed structures were abandoned, but the idea itself was not revised. It was shown, that it was rather the way in which these concepts were implemented, which was not satisfying. Nevertheless, BERSTA and EVI still share the idea of an 'active consumership', which goes beyond what is suggested by the emerging trend of 'ethical consumption' and denotes a conscious and active debate about the conditions of production, processing and distribution.

Suggestions for a (re)politisation of food

From our point of view, the strategies and core ideas formulated in EVI and BERSTA could be fruitfully linked with recent discussions about food democracy and food sovereignty, which focus on the democratisation of the agro-food system, the right to food and solidarity among producers and consumers (Patel, 2009; Hassanein, 2003). We would like to summarise below the points of contact, which, as far as we can tell, already exist and which could be used as a starting point for the development of joint strategies and alliances.

Claiming the right to food and the aim of societal change

The concepts of food democracy and food sovereignty are linked to the right to food as a basic human need. Both concepts aim at wide-ranging societal change in order to reach this goal. We have already mentioned above, that there is already a cautious disassociation with using 'organic plus' as a possible strategy to co-opt 'values' in order to use them as mere marketing assets. BERSTA and EVI share this caution. Even though they do not yet refer to a general right to high quality and healthy food, it is somehow inherent to their aim to provide healthy and ecologically sustainable produced food at affordable prices.

Practicing a method of involvement

The concept of food sovereignty is demanding social and environmental conditions and mechanisms for the control of food production, processing and procurement (Forster, 2008). Likewise, the concept of food democracy "seeks to expose and challenge the anti-democratic forces of control and ascertains the rights and responsibilities of citizens to participate in decision-making" (Hassanein, 2003:83). BERSTA and EVI refer to this claim of democracy and joint decision-making with regard to their organisational structures (e.g. via the cooperation between the BERSTA association and the BERSTA trading company). On the one hand, this dedication to democratic structures is based on the commitment of people involved. On the other hand, there are certain structures that support democracy beyond a mere personal commitment. From our point of view, there is a need to take into account these structural aspects, especially in the case of the foundation of new initiatives.

Active 'consumership'

At the core of food democracy concepts, such as food sovereignty, rests the belief that every citizen – farmers as well as consumers - has the right and responsibility to make a contribution to the food-system (Hassanein, 2003; Patel 2009). In regard to the involvement of consumers as active parts of the food-chain, EVI and BERSTA have not yet found additional possibilities to expand their strategy of active communication. However, we would like to mention that the word of mouth – as well as in the form of leaflets, newsletters, even excursions to farms – might be under-estimated as a strategy to raise consumers' awareness. An EVI shop manager mentioned that most of the consumers feel unable to cope with the large number of labels that already exist. One of the advantages of the EVI

shop is that consumers can simply ask for advice, instead of reading and comparing labels. Nevertheless, it was mentioned that in regard to the active participation of consumers, some new ideas and strategies would be needed.

Conclusions

From our point of view, the emerging discussion of 'organic plus' as a strategy differentiate oneself from the increasingly conventionalised organic market can be understood as a chance to politicise food production and procurement. Therefore, it is necessary to be conscious about the different motives and approaches behind this strategy. The two initiatives we draw on in this article reject the use of 'organic plus' features as a marketing strategy which is promoting additional certification as a formal form of communicating additional criteria to consumers. Instead they are committed to a strategy of 'active communication' with consumers on a face to face basis in order to involve them in a more societal and political discussion about food.

EVI and BERSTA are rooted in the same history. Their foundation was embedded in a wider process, which aimed at a renewed valuation of disadvantaged rural regions, emphasising local democracy, mutual aid, strong local networks, sufficient livelihoods for small farmers, solidarity among consumers and producers and organic farming practices. The initiatives were established in order to reach these goals, based on the principles of self-governance, fairness and the regional origin of products. Throughout the process of EVI's and BERSTA's professionalisation the principle of self-governance, in the sense of cooperation between producers and consumers and joint decision making, was abandoned to some degree along with the dissolution of the cooperative. As mentioned above, this was not based on the revision of the idea itself, but rather due to the inability of enacting it in a satisfying way. Nevertheless, both initiatives still share the conviction that consumers have not only the right but also the responsibility to become actively involved in the discussion about relevant issues related to the (agro-)food system. One might argue that their strategies to reach this aim – face to face communication with consumers, leaflets and guided shop tours – are rather restricted forms of action. We would like to add that the chance and possibility for an onward process of politicisation is based on the core ideas of these initiatives and that these ideas are the actual value of EVI and BERSTA.

The practices of EVI and BERSTA are still based on their initial core ideas, which were formulated in a wider process of regional development in the late 1970s. These ideas have several points of overlap with the recent discussions about the political dimension of food. It seems that the emerging discussion about 'organic plus' could be used as a chance to connect socio-economical, cultural and territorial as well as political approaches to the question of how and by whom food should be produced, distributed and consumed in order to create a more sustainable and more equally balanced food system.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank all interview partners, who gave us an insight into their daily practice and shared their ideas about organic farming, processing and marketing with us. We also would like to thank all partners involved in the FAAN project, for discussions and comments, bringing forward new ideas about an alternative agro-food system. This article is based on work carried out in the scope of the project 'FAAN – Facilitating Alternative Agro-Food Networks: a Stakeholders' Perspective on Research Needs', funded by the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme under grant agreement no. 217820.

References

- Behr, D. and Bloyos, L. (2008) Schlafende Riesen? Kritik des kritischen Konsums und Thesen zu Brüchigkeiten in der Wertschöpfungskette. *Kurswechsel* 3/2008: 70-79
- Forster, F. (2008) Ernährungssouveränität: Alternativen, Widerstand und Perspektiven. Über die gesellschaftliche Relevanz von Ernährung. *Kurswechsel* 3/2008: 59-69
- Gössinger, K. and Freyer, B. (2009) Communication of ethical activities going beyond organic standards in European organic enterprises. In: Millar, K. et al. (ed.): *Ethical futures: bioscience and food horizons*. Wageningen Academic Publishers, pp. 389-293
- Hassanein, N. (2003) Practicing food democracy: a pragmatic politics of transformation. *Journal of Rural Studies* 19: 77-86
- Johnston, J., Biro, A. and MacKendrick, N. (2009) Lost in the Supermarket: The Corporate-Organic Foodscape and the Struggle for Food Democracy. *Antipode* Vol. 41 No.3: 509-532.
- Federal Ministry of Agricultur, Forestry, Environment and Water Management (2008): *Lebensmittelbericht 2008*
- Liebig, R. (2007) Was der Kunde begehrt. In: *Bio Austria. Fachzeitschrift für Landwirtschaft und Ökologie*, 4/2007, p. 34
- Mutersbaugh, T. (2005) Fighting standards with standards: harmonization, rents and social accountability in certified agrofood networks. *Environment and Planning* Vol.37: 2033-2051
- Padel, S. and Röcklingsberg, H. (2009) A conceptual framework for the communication of ethical values going beyond standards in organic farming. In: Millar, K. et al. (ed.): *Ethical futures: bioscience and food horizons*. Wageningen Academic Publishers, pp. 394-399
- Patel, R. (2009) Grassroots voices. Food sovereignty. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* Vol. 36 No.3: 663-706
- Rohrmoser, A. (2004) Gemeinwesenarbeit und Eigenständige Regionalentwicklung. In: Rohrmoser, A. (ed.) *GemeinWesenArbeit im ländlichen Raum*. Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, pp. 35-86.
- Scheer, G. (2008) Ein Vater der eigenständigen Regionalentwicklung. Interview published in: Verein Regionalmanagement Österreich (ed.): *Regionen sind auch nur Menschen*. Eigenverlag, pp. 141-152.
- Schermer, M. (2008) *The decline of farmers direct marketing in Asutria: consequences and counter strategies*. Article for the 8th European IFSA Symposium in Clermont-Ferrand, France, 6-10 July 2008.
- Scherrer, V. (2007) Was folgt dem Erfolg? In: *Bio Austria. Fachzeitschrift für Landwirtschaft und Ökologie* 5/2007: 40-41