



Experiences with Eco-Regions in Austria: Potentials and Limitations

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What is an Eco-Region?

“Eco-Region” (“Bioregion” in German)

- transform organic farming from a farm level to a regional scale
- base sustainable territorial development on
 - local organic farming practices and products as ideational anchor points and
 - active participation of organic farmers in such processes
- comply with territorial development policies (“second pillar” of the CAP)



Preconditions for Eco-Regions in Austria

- 16,3% of the agricultural area of Austria farmed organically,
- by 14.7 % of all farms (BMLFUW 2009)
- Some regions in alpine regions have reached up to over 50%.
- High government emphasis on 2nd Pillar of CAP
- Tradition in endogenous regional development



Potential benefits

For the organic sector :

- reconnect production to a given territory and
- focus on regional value chains as counterstrategy to “conventionalisation”

For rural development:

- sharpen the notion of sustainability by providing a concrete example
- create a coherent path for development



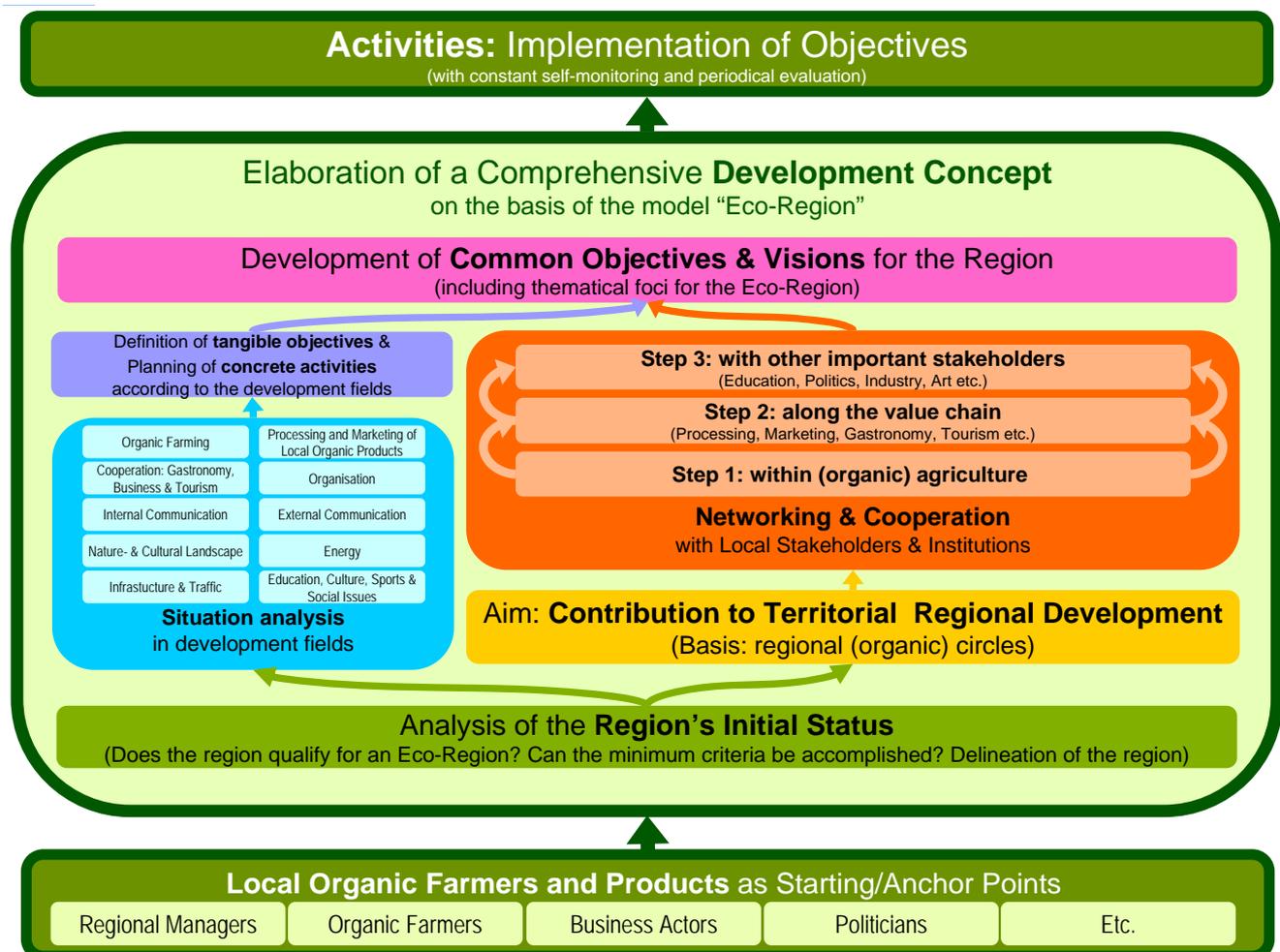
Eco-Regions as a model for sustainable rural development

A participatory national funded action research project

- From January 2005 until November 2007
- Four regions in different geographical locations, stages of development etc.
- Phase I (2005-March 2007):
 - 4 Workshops (multi stakeholder participants)
 - Bi-monthly progress meetings
- Phase II (March 2007-November 2007)
 - Concrete development concepts in two regions

Results: the model

- Eco-regions are processes rather than a fixed status
- Minimum criteria
 - ➔ clear delineation of the region,
 - ➔ a percentage of organic farms above the national average and
 - ➔ the setting up of a regional organisational structure for organic farming
 - ➔ No GMO used in agriculture within the region
- Main instrument: a comprehensive development concept with concrete measures according to fixed obligatory development domains





Regional Results: Bio-Heu-Region Trumer Seenland

- Initiated by organic cooperative (today 240 members)
- cultural practices and geophysical boundaries
- overlaps two provinces (Salzburg and Upper Austria) and four LEADER regions
 - Difficult structure to secure support
- links to other sectors remain still rather weak:
 - Local supply chains for niche products (like spelt)
 - punctual co-operations with a cultural centre and local tourism offices
 - Limited involvement of local dairy industry, which is the backbone of agriculture.
- Dairies operate with “region of delicacy – hay-milk cheese” designation by the federal ministry of agriculture
 - Competition with eco-Region



Regional Results: Bioregion Murau

- One district, clear administrative, geographical and cultural-historical boundaries
- Initial idea by local entrepreneurs
 - core group (a baker, a plumbing entrepreneur, an organic farmer, a local rural development advisor)
 - working groups in different sections (energy, agriculture, tourism and commerce).
 - local organic farmers are weakly organised.
- Competing initiative of a big discounter
 - Going „beyond organic“: Zurück zum Ursprung (without RD-vision)



Conclusion of project results

In both cases organic farmers fail to defend the Eco Region against the conventional sector

- In the **Bio-Heu-Region** the distinction between the Eco-Region and the (conventional) hay-milk region is blurred
- Problem:
 - ➔ farmers are not regional development agents, the regional networking remains weak
 - ➔ Problem to secure institutional and financial support in the region (different layers of administration)
 - ➔ Problem of co-financing of rural development funds
- In the **Bioregion Murau** the Eco-Region is only one way to achieve the prime goal: enhancing the regional added value.
 - ➔ Problem: the actors in Murau started with regional networking before the organic farmers were organised



General limitations identified

- ➔ Lack of backing by institutional sector, e.g. Bio Austria or Government institutions
 - for certification of Regions
 - for monitoring of progress
- ➔ Problem of co-financing in RD-Programs (for local activators)
 - Financial basis and commitment of farmers is weak
 - The results of local activators are not tangible enough on short notice
- ➔ Necessity of „linking social capital“ to activate existing support



New effort: Bioregion Mühlviertel

- Official start: May 2010
- Joint project of 7 Leader Regions
 - Included in regional programs
 - Institutional network
 - Strong organisational structure
- Building on network of producers and processors
 - 2000 organic farmers in the region (53%),
 - organic seed producers, mills, bakery, butcheries, dairy, herbprocessing
 - Including agricultural school converted to organic
- Goal: establishing a regional brand on the basis of the Eco-region model



Thank you for
your attention!