

The Organic Farming Strategy in Vorarlberg. Towards a socio-ecological transformation?

Vivien Lunda^a

^a *Institute for Multi-Level Governance and Development, WU - Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria*

Summary

The Agriculture Strategy 2020 "Organic Farming Vorarlberg – regional and fair" is presented as best practice example towards a sustainable local food system in Austria. In interplay with the local government this process is not only fostered through bottom-up approaches, but even supported by top-down engagement. The Agriculture Strategy is the result of collective action where key actors brought in their different perceptions over local, sustainable agriculture.

This paper analyses the potential of the Agriculture Strategy to foster a socio-ecological transformation towards a local food system by questioning in what ways existing structures are challenged through reflexive and critical actions and in how far underlying values and beliefs are negotiated between actor groups. In the framework of an institutional analysis and narrative policy analysis relevant actors, institutions and structures, their relations and role are identified. Expert and stakeholder interviews of involved actors give insight into sites of resistance and hegemony.

Extended Abstract

Contemporary prevailing trends such as globalization and industrialization of markets have caused counter-movements towards value-based localized production and consumption patterns that originated approaches such as Alternative Agro-Food Networks, Community Supported Agriculture and Slow Food. In this context sustainable local or community-based action emerged as a precursor of a paradigm change in rural development that refers to the embeddedness of food supply chains and local production in (rural) regions with the expected consequence of spatial valorisation and its local contribution to global sustainable development (Goodman 2004; Marsden et al 1999; Renting et al 2003). However, there is growing criticism about such concepts only being applicable for a privileged fringe group without any further development from its niche existence and therefore reinforcing local and social disparities (Goodman 2004).

Given this critical reflection the requisite transformation is not to be limited to "singular controlled transitions" (Stirling 2014:2) and "technical corrections to the current economic and social model" that evoke only specific structural changes but rather needs to be fundamental given the example of the Neolithic and Industrial revolutions (Haberl et al 2011:8). The different perceptions about the core aspects of transformation such as a fundamental political change and the transition towards a post-fossil society are to be combined in one paramount objective for change involving multiple actors across interlinked levels (Brown et al. 2013). A third Great transformation is required which is triggered through "fundamental and not only gradual changes in our interaction with natural systems" and essentially is based upon institutional change towards a zero growth society (Haberl et al 2001:11).

Possible key drivers to foster change in the incumbent food system are social movements, environmental and related agricultural sustainability movements as well as local efforts for building

an alternative food regime in order to create a pathway for necessary environmental and social change by “challenging the ways we think and talk about food” (Gottlieb 2001:271). However, as it is not sufficient to engage actors and stakeholders as change agents for a new agro-food system in political and social struggles, local food-system stakeholders from public and private sectors need to be actively involved and empowered for a complete transformation that “requires a complete transformation of the society” (Hassanein 2003:77). Besides a supportive actor network, the positive interaction of actors on different levels is a prerequisite for a successful transformation. Actors in this context are therefore not only limited to supporting actors but are broadened to mainstream consumers, producers, policy makers and other stakeholders in the specific region to allow a solution-based interaction.

Besides the actor level, local action needs to be institutionally embedded at “the level of technical, market, social and institutional support” (Smith 2007:429). When implementing a local food system strategy it is indispensable to take into account local institutional interests, though with consideration of dividing between local institutions that are a great support and are “more successful in promoting democratic, reflexive localist solutions” and institutions that “merely perpetuate local inequalities” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005:367). According to Sharp and Jackson-Smith (2010) institutional support is dependent on active policies, programs and organisations, the social and cultural characteristics of active communities in the agricultural development as well as activities initiating changes in the number of farms, total agricultural sales, land in farms, and urban agricultural/local food activities.

In this context, the Agriculture Strategy 2020 “Ökoland Vorarlberg – regional und fair” (Organic Farming Vorarlberg – regional and fair) is presented as best practice example towards a sustainable local food system in Austria that is both locally supported and institutionally embedded. In interplay with the local government this process is not only fostered through bottom-up approaches, but even supported by top-down engagement. Collective action where actors bring in their different perceptions over local, sustainable agriculture and build their joint strategies and aims resulted in a 16 objectives framework in the fields of quality of life, education, entrepreneurship, tourism and trading, agricultural income, country of cheese and milk, local supply, organic farms, animal protection, seal of quality, energy autonomy, protection of land and property, cultivation/settlement, alpine pasturing, grassland management.

This paper analyses the potential of the Organic Farming Strategy Vorarlberg to foster a socio-ecological transformation towards a local food system by questioning in what ways existing structures are challenged through reflexive and critical actions and in how far underlying values and beliefs are negotiated between actor groups. In the framework of an institutional analysis and narrative policy analysis relevant actors, institutions and structures as well as their relations and their role are identified. Expert and stakeholder interviews of involved actors give insight into sites of resistance and hegemony.

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