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Organic farming as a factor for territorial development: a comparative perspective

Markus Schermer, Claire Lamine, Patrizia Pugliese, Christoph Furtschegger,
Samuel Buis

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Places of possibility?

Rural Societies in a Neoliberal World

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Organic farming as a factor for territorial development: a comparative perspective

Schermer M.¹, Lamine C., Pugliese P., Furtschegger C., Bui S.

In various European countries, organic farming acts as a driving factor for territorial development, forming initiatives like the Biovallée in France, Biodistretti in Italy or Bioregionen in Austria. These initiatives aspire to create 'model regions' for sustainable development not only in agriculture, but in a wider perspective. While the overall objective is similar for all approaches, the outcomes differ as our analysis of three European territories shows.

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous factors encouraging or hampering the success of rural development, like initiating actors, endowment with endogenous resources, public support, framework conditions and so forth (Bryden & Hart 2004). For long term sustainable rural development, the combination of all of these factors seems to be crucial. As a result, there is generally more than one possible development path, and, according to the concept of neo-endogenous development (Ray 1998), a conscious choice is necessary. Our comparison of three cases, which apply organic farming as a guiding principle for territorial development, analyses the impact of different governance structures and institutional settings on the territoriality of the development approach. The case study material includes interviews, institutional reports and available secondary scientific literature and statistical data.

THE CASE STUDY REGIONS

In the Mühlviertel (Upper Austria), endogenous rural development and organic farming dates back as far as to the early 1980s. However, the current "Bioregion Mühlviertel" was formed in 2010 by 7 LEADER regions and the Euregio 'Bayrischer Wald-Böhmerwald' in a broad participative process, resulting in a comprehensive regional development concept (www.bioregion-muehlviertel.at).

In France, the Biovallée is located in the Drôme valley, in the Rhône-Alpes region. Like the Mühlviertel, it is considered as a cradle of organic farming and has a long history of rural development. The Biovallée project was launched in 2009 by local authorities, building on public programs supporting organic farming, which had been set up already in the early 1990s. The current project embraces a wide range of objectives concerning energy, waste

management, preservation of agricultural areas and natural resources, further education and the promotion of organic food and farming (<http://www.biovallee.fr>).

The Biodistretto Cilento (www.biodistretto.net) is situated in the region of Campania in the south of Italy. It was created 2009 with the support of the organic farming association (AIAB) after a series of public events with local stakeholders and comprises all levels of local government. The official memorandum of understanding included pilot activities like organic group certification, specific production guidelines for organic producers, an awareness campaign and the establishment of various short supply chain marketing initiatives.

All three territorial projects want to position themselves as model regions for sustainable rural development. They aspire to turn from "the hinterland of the productivist period to the foreland of the quality period" (like a political slogan from the Drôme valley framed it in 1995). However, the three organizational set-ups as well as their historical evolution differ significantly.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AS BACKGROUND OF PRESENT ORGANIZATION STRUCTURES

The Austrian case builds on the tradition of the endogenous development approach from the late 1970s. Innovative projects were initiated with a focus on local human, cultural and natural resources. The successful initial results of this approach later formed the basis for an 'eco-social' agricultural (and rural) policy in the mid-1980s (Schermer 2015). Rural development, with the goal of supporting a small scale farm structure, remained a substantial part of the agricultural sectors' policy. This explains why the people who initiated the Bioregion (and who are still very influential) came from the mainstream side of agricultural administration. However, it appears that the configuration of the LEADER groups in the Mühlviertel, mirroring the different economic sectors, prevents the agricultural sector to take the lead. This makes it difficult for the Bioregion to be accepted as an overarching institution by the various sectors it wants to comprise (i.e. energy, tourism, education and handicraft) and to achieve a holistic territorial approach.

In France, the Biovallée project was created by the four districts of the valley. In the 2000s, the districts built together a first version of the Biovallée project in the frame of a national program focused

⁶³ Markus Schermer (markus.schermer@uibk.ac.at) is Associate Professor at the University of Innsbruck, Department of Sociology, Mountain Agriculture Research Unit, A-6020 Innsbruck/Austria.



on key value chains. With a program of the Rhône-Alpes Region aimed at fostering sustainable development on small territories, the Biovallée project then evolved into a much more integrated program for rural development, with organic farming as a key factor. Although the district authorities in charge of the project consulted agricultural actors in the appraisal process, they strived to keep a stronghold on the agricultural chapter of the project. This results in a current position that favours public utility rather than profitability, and employment-generating small-scale farming rather than industrial organic farming.

In Italy, Bio-distretti can be seen as a specific interpretation of the combined notions of 'rural districts' and 'quality agro-food districts', both defined by the Italian Agricultural Act. In contrast to 'industrial districts' which focus on clusters of small enterprises and the local municipalities, these concepts include the natural environment, civil society and the production of very specific goods or services (Brunori and Rossi 2007). The hybrid construction of this 'Bio-distretti' approach explains why a national organization like AIAB (Italian Association for Organic Agriculture) who deals with both, 'rural districts' as well as 'quality agro-food districts', is the main promotor and why it was possible to initiate already a number of new Bio-distretti following the model of the Cilento.

CONSEQUENCES

First of all, the organizational structure determines to some extent the measures applied in the territorial development strategy. In the case of Biovallée and Bio-distretto, the inclusion of administrative institutions (albeit on different levels) has resulted in a more integrated approach for rural development, embracing a larger scope, whereas in the Mühlviertel, the focus remained more agricultural.

Secondly, the involvement of different economic stakeholders finds its expression in the orientation of the supply chains. While in the Biovallée and in the Cilento, entire chains from production to consumption, including public catering etc. have been progressively built up, in the Mühlviertel, strong private organic processors (breweries, bakeries and butcheries) are the backbone of marketing activities so far.

Thirdly, the relationship between organic and conventional actors in the region is decisive for a further development of the territorial approach. On farm level, the territorial initiatives seem to stimulate conversion to organic farming. For instance, in the Biovallée, many conventional actors have converted totally or partially to organic farming, and most conventional and organic farmers have good relationships. For example, a farmers' cooperative marketing grain has set up a 100% organic farming goal, and half the trainings provided by the local

agricultural school are dedicated to organic farming. Also in the Mühlviertel, the aim is to integrate partially converted organic processors and to stimulate conversion. The regional agricultural school is even the first organic school in Austria. In the Cilento, organic and conventional farmers jointly participate in training initiatives organized by the Bio-distretti which facilitates the convergence of farmers' interests and behaviours.

In turn, the relationships on the level of organizations may be different. While it seems to be less conflicting in the Austrian case, where the agricultural administration is the paramount actor, in the French case the Chamber of agriculture has long been in a conflictual relationship with the local authorities, denying their competence and legitimacy to define an agricultural policy.

CONCLUSIONS

The orientation of endogenous development processes depends to a large extent on the configuration of actors in the organizational structure. As our results indicate, the present composition of actors mirrors the initial actors who were building on historical national and regional rural development policies. Therefore path dependencies determine to a large extent the configuration and ultimately the manifestation of territorial development through organic agriculture. This impacts the construction of supply chains as well as the social relations between conventional and organic farmers and their organizations.

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