

Project summary

The importance of the solidarity economy for the development of organic farming in Europe, past and present



Background

The importance of organic farming for the greening of food systems is largely undisputed. However, despite the sharp rise in recognition of organic farming as an alternative to conventional farming, its real significance for sustainably securing the global food system is still far short of its potential. This raises the question as to which ideas, strategies, and different economic development models can contribute to the promotion of organic farming and to a reorientation of agriculture towards a sustainable food system. Combining the solidarity economy with organic farming is one possible strategy, which can make a significant contribution to the development of a new sustainable development path in the food sector.

Agricultural initiatives of the solidarity economy represent an alternative model of sustainable agricultural production and food supply. The solidarity economy aims to achieve a circular economy; direct partnerships between producers and consumers; fair, cost-covering prices; and, preferably, organic production methods. In the last two decades, forms of the solidarity economy in agriculture have markedly increased, as reflected in the foundation of associations, e.g. the *Verband regionale Vertragslandwirtschaft* RVL in German-speaking Switzerland, the FRACP (*la fédération romande d'agriculture contractuelle de proximité*) in French-speaking Switzerland, the SoLaWi (*Solidarische Landwirtschaft*) in Germany, the AMPA (*associations pour le maintien de l'agriculture paysanne*) in France, the GAS (*gruppi di acquisto solidale*) in Italy, and the GELA (*gemeinschaftlich getragene Landwirtschaft*) in Austria.

Through their rationale on production and consumption, participants in solidarity economy initiatives strive for a transformation of the current food system towards sustainability. This project aims for a better understanding and analysis of the connection between organic farming and the solidarity economy as a new, guiding model, with a view to enabling its systematic promotion.

Goals

The research project examines how agricultural initiatives based on the solidarity economy can promote the growth of organic farming in Switzerland and its neighbouring countries France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. To this end, it is important to show where the opportunities and limitations of organic farming lie in relation to the development of new, associative, and cooperative-oriented economic forms, which in themselves represent central problem areas – well beyond organic agriculture – for the sustainable renewal of current food systems. The project also investigates which agricultural policy frameworks have a conducive or hindering effect on the spread of organic initiatives based on the solidarity economy.

In addition to basic research, the transdisciplinary project aims at an interactive integration of the expertise of solidarity economy/organic farming actors from practice, policy, and research, and supports their creation of national and transnational networks. The development of a cross-cultural, transdisciplinary platform is aimed at strengthening the dialogue and exchange of experience across national, linguistic, and cultural borders, making it possible to have pro-active knowledge transfer between organic farming and solidarity agriculture beyond the duration of the project.

Further, the project aims at developing and identifying measures which support – politically, economically, socially, and financially – the conditions for promoting organic initiatives based on the solidarity economy. The measures will then be discussed and introduced as part of an enhanced “policy dialogue” between the various stakeholders and other regional and national agricultural platforms.

Research questions and methods

Research questions on systems knowledge:

1. How strong are organic farming initiatives based on the solidarity economy today in Swiss agriculture and in the neighbouring countries? How are they organized, in which regions are they winning ground in particular, and where is it difficult for them to gain a foothold?
2. What are the most common causes and triggers for the development of solidarity economy initiatives, and what key issues do they face, from the foundation to the consolidation of their organization?
3. What importance did elements of the solidarity economy have for the development and spread of organic farming in its earlier development phases? To what extent, if at all, do these elements still influence the motivation for the engagement in organic farming initiatives based on the solidarity economy?

Research questions on target knowledge:

4. What are the reasons and motivation for the commitment to organic farming initiatives based on the solidarity economy, and what values and sustainability ideas do producers, processors, and consumers associate with these initiatives?

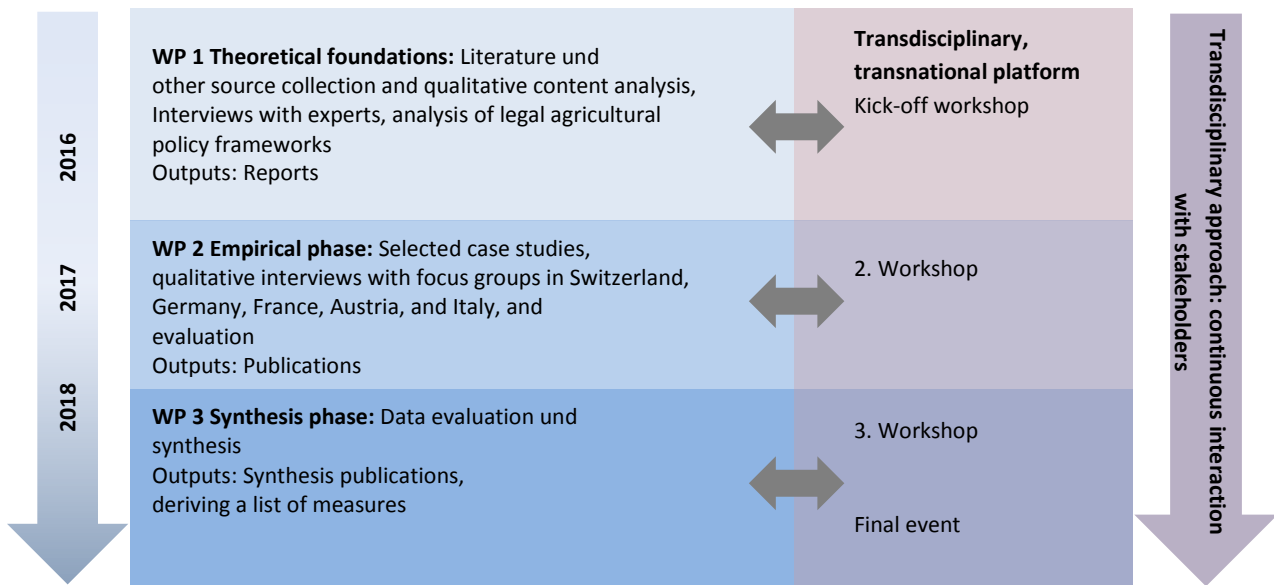
Research questions on transformation knowledge:

5. How do agricultural policy frameworks affect the promotion or obstruction of organic farming initiatives based on the solidarity economy?
6. What changes are needed in agricultural policy, the public administration, farming and business advisory services, specialized business associations and companies, practice-oriented research, and consumer organizations, so that organic farming initiatives based on the solidarity economy can unfold their full potential?
7. How can the actors of the organic farming movement better network with each other and increase their clout in the development of partnerships with private and state actors, so that they can pro-actively and efficiently help shape the necessary changes on the level of policy, the economy, and practice?

Methodologically, the work is based on the assessment of literature and other sources, as well as structured interviews and focus groups, whose essence is developed and interpreted through qualitative content analysis. The geographic scope of the research adheres to the following principle: each research question is first tackled through a close examination of the Swiss context. Comparative studies are then conducted depending on the significance of the individual questions for other countries such as France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. These studies aim at identifying similarities and differences between the countries and enhancing experience-sharing. Practitioners and the organizations that support them are selected with care to ensure a high potential for mutual learning, networking, and cooperation.

The transdisciplinary character of the research project requires the research questions to be discussed with the actors in organic farming/the solidarity economy at the start of the project, if this has not already been done. The aim is to give actors from practice the opportunity to help shape the focus of the individual research questions and suggest any clarifications. The transdisciplinary approach not only leads to the close involvement of the actors from practice and policy of organic farming and the solidarity economy-based initiatives in agriculture. It also lays the foundations for concrete changes such as networking, policy dialogue, and knowledge transfer.

Project plan



Funding

Stiftung Mercator Schweiz

Research team

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Project duration

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