

Strategies of Family Farms to Strengthen their Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Resilience thinking offers a framework to emphasize dynamics and interdependencies across time, space and domains. It is based on understanding social–ecological systems as complex, and future developments as unpredictable, thus emphasizing adaptive approaches to management. In this paper the four clusters of factors that have been identified as building resilience in large-scale social–ecological systems are applied at the farm level. Suggestions on how these factors could be operationalized at the farm level are derived from workshops held with family farmers in Austria. The results show that farmers understand change as unpredictable and unfolding, have a number of strategies to ensure the flexibility and adaptability of their farm and build extensive networks to diversify information and income sources. However, these strategies, while ensuring adaptability and transformability, compete for scarce resources. The farmers thus face trade-offs between strategies that ensure the adaptive capacity of their farm over the long term and those ensuring profitability over the short term. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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Introduction

WITH NEARLY HALF OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S SURFACE (EU-21) BEING USED FOR AGRICULTURE (Eurostat, 2008), farmers manage vast tracts of land, shaping ecosystems, habitats and landscapes. Farmers thus play a key role in the interface between society and the environment. So far research on farm management has mostly focused on efficient production of food and fibre while ensuring that pollution does not exceed legal limits. There are a number of models addressing the environmental impact of farming, but few of these integrate social aspects (e.g. sustainability of rural communities, provision of landscape amenities) or allow for dynamic changes caused e.g. by farmers' learning. Given the dearth of conceptual frameworks integrating ecological, social and economic sustainability over various temporal and spatial scales, resilience thinking (Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Scoones *et al.*, 2007) may contribute to better understanding the interlinkages and the challenges involved in moving towards sustainable food production, diverse agro-ecosystems and lively rural areas. Resilience is the 'capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing

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