Family farms in the mountain region: What principles contribute to resilience?
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Key words: resilience, principles, alpine area, family farm

Abstract: The multifunctional activities of farmers in the alpine area and the active management of alpine farmland are the key for an attractive, lively rural area. However, farming under difficult alpine conditions is not compatible with the paradigm of modernization and farm growth, currently propagated. Farmers face the challenge to find alternative strategies to secure their livelihood, while staying adaptive to deal with changing political, environmental and social conditions. How do small and medium sized farms master these challenges? What allows them to be resilient? The Austrian case study of the research project RETHINK addresses these questions. Interviews with 30 farmers were held in the province of Salzburg (AT), to identify principles that strengthen the resilience of family farms, i.e. their ability to face shocks and stresses through persistence, adaptability and transformability. The farms were selected through snowballing, to cover a high diversity of full- and part-time farmers, as well as specialized and diversified farms. The interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and coded. Even though the interviewed farmers pursued different strategies, based on individual values and aims, we identified common principles that allowed farms to be resilient. These include: solidarity within the family; diversity of income sources (on- and off-farm, several marketing channels); the willingness to learn and experiment; a high degree of autonomy through low external inputs (which is characteristic for organic farming); as well as a low level of debt. Cooperation between farms enables mutual support and the pursuit of common goals in agricultural initiatives, further strengthens the resilience, both at farm and regional level. The results of this study are helpful to understand the persistence of family farms. Policies that would strengthen the implementation of these principles could contribute to maintain a sustainable, successful agriculture in the alpine area.

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Family farms in the mountains: What principles contribute to resilience?

Aim
To identify principles that strengthen resilience of family farms
Resilience is the ability to face shocks and stresses through:
- Persistence
- Adaptability
- Transformability

Relevance
- Maintain lively rural areas through farms providing multifunctional services
- Farming under difficult Alpine conditions is not compatible with the modernization paradigm that focuses on farm growth and productivity increase
- Farms need to find alternative strategies to secure the livelihood of the family
- Farms need to stay adaptive to cope with changing political, environmental, and social conditions

Research area: Salzburg (AT)
- 90% of farms are located in ‘less favoured areas’
- Over 60% of the farms are classified as ‘mountain farms’

Data collection and analysis
- Interviews at 30 family farms, mostly milk producers
- Qualitative analysis: interviews were recorded, transcribed in full, and coded (QDA software: ti-analysis)

Results
To ensure farm resilience, farmers pursue different strategies based on individual values and aims.
Two broad strategies can be distinguished, that both have strengths and weaknesses:
- Specialisation
- Diversification
Farmers also implement creative mixtures of these strategies.

Principles to strengthen resilience

Solidarity within the family
High degree of autonomy
Sharing of knowledge
Preparedness and learning capability
Adaptability and flexibility
Willingness to learn and to experiment
Diversity of income sources
Low level of debt
Cooperation between farmers
Common activities in initiatives
Mutual support and exchange
Illustrations: Simon Kneebone

Conclusion
Policies that support farmers with the implementation of these principles (e.g. through the support of knowledge exchange networks and social learning initiatives) can contribute to maintain a sustainable, successful agriculture in the Alpine area.

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