

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 snow-balling, 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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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'



Agriculture in the research area is characterized by small and medium-scale farms located in the alpine area.

Data collection and analysis

- **Interviews** at 30 family farms, mostly milk producers
- **Qualitative analysis:** interviews were recorded, transcribed in full, and coded (QDA software: f4-analyse)

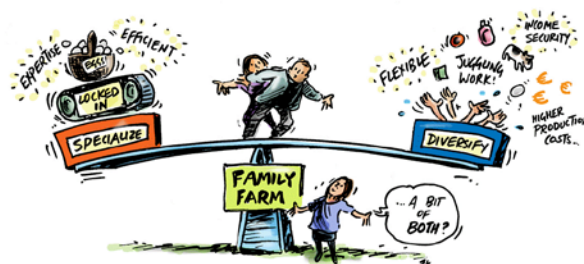
Results

To ensure farm resilience, farmers pursue **different strategies** based on **individual values and aims**.

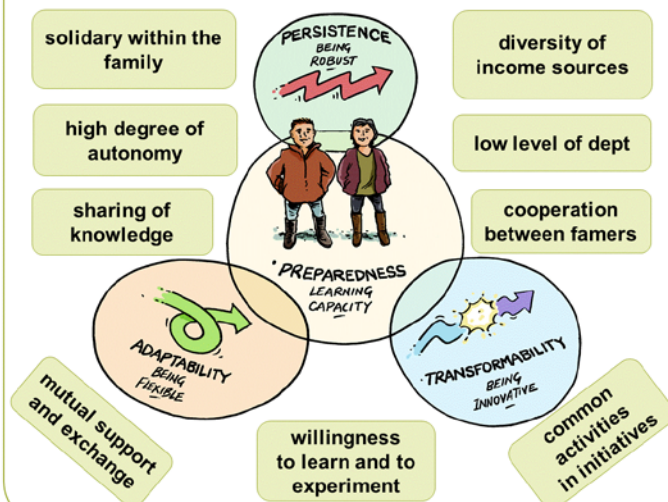
Two broad strategies can be distinguished, that both have strengths and weaknesses:

- **Specialisation**
- **Diversification**

Farmers also implement creative mixtures of these strategies.



Principles to strengthen resilience



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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