

Appendix 19: Lower Saxony (Germany, SC4)

Organising partner:	Kulturland, ILS	Innovation Type
Practice:	Training in “nature professions”: a driving force for the rural regeneration of Pays Coutançais (France, FR6B)	
Practice context:	Coutance, Manche department (NUTS3)- Predominantly rural	
Confrontation context:	Niedersachsen (NUTS 2) - Predominantly rural	
Workshop location:	Online	
Date:	November 2nd 2021	

Summary

The case study “Training in “nature professions”: a driving force for the rural regeneration of Pays Coutançais” offered many departing routes for further investigation. Due to the inherent ability of education to catalyze change, we selected the NUTS2 area of Lower Saxony to be confronted with the educational aspect of the case study. Lower Saxony is one of the German federal states with the lowest share of organic farmed land and organic farming schools. In addition to the specific educational aspects, the case offers opportunities to investigate the cohabitation of different actors (indigenous community and newcomers) in the rural landscape. This enables us to explore reasons and solutions that are relevant to create a growing rural community. The initial idea was to confront the “Coutances case” with stakeholders from a conventional school. Through this comparison we might have identified advantages and disadvantages of conventional and organic agricultural education, as well as to trigger change and development. Unfortunately the cooperation proved to be unfruitful. The contacted school, one of the most renowned conventional agricultural schools in Low Saxony, was not open to dialogue and stated being not interested in including organic approaches in their curriculum. We decided to address the topic differently and organized the workshops with independent educators and alumni. Local authorities were broadly invited but did not show any interest in participating. Due to that, the results are based on a very small sample of interested people, so there might be a bias towards organic farming. Nevertheless we were able to gain additional insights and relevant information to add to the case.

Context

In Lower Saxony the current offering of education in organic farming (OF) is very limited. There is only one public school consistently offering a third year specialization in OF for conventional agriculture students⁴⁶. The private schools that partially cover the gap between conventional and organic farming are not well perceived by the public administration, besides they are less financially supported as public schools. Because the majority of the farms operate in a conventional mode, the demand for qualified workers in conventional farming is bigger. This of course influences both the availability of apprenticeship jobs as well as the interests of trainees, especially when they have a farming background. The farms operating in ecological mode tend to be much smaller, consequently they have less resources to employ and train youngsters. In addition, “the eco-scene has no interest in building up a parallel educational system”(DE2-SC4-02) as it was stated by one of the participants. In fact, the idea is to influence the conventional sector with organic farming practices, to achieve the objective of broadening OF . But as a concern, the willingness of the state to act, as well as the readiness of current school staff to evolve in this new direction is doubtful (DE2-SC4-05).

Results

First impressions

The interest of the participants in the case study was very high, especially due to the fact that there are very few schools offering education in organic farming in Lower Saxony. The participants evaluated the characteristics of the showcased school as a combined offering for various age groups as interesting and easily applicable in Germany. But it was neither considered as the main innovative aspect of the school nor as an advantage compared to conventional, separated systems. The participants had the feeling that different age groups experience their learning environment differently and may not even cross each other’s way, unless the curriculum is specifically designed for creating an intergenerational exchange (DE2-SC4-02). But since there are hardly any formal offerings in Lower Saxony to support a professional transition for adults, the case offered a concrete possibility for the development of such a path.

Listed below the reader can find specific aspects that attract more attention to OF and can be seen as opportunities:

1. Educational approach that responds to student’s needs, by placing students as key agents of the transformation process. Especially if one assumes, as stated by one participant, that “students are more rapidly adjusting to the reality of the environment than members of the formal school structures and governmental bodies” (DE2-SCç-05). More precisely this two characteristics of the Coutances Lycee (high school) were highlighted:

⁴⁶ The Justus-von-Liebig-School of the Hannover Region, <https://www.jvl.de/>

- A. collaborative development of new professions, such as the paysan boulanger, aggregating steps of the value chain in one profession and thus increasing the income of the farmer as well as the quality of the product;
 - B. workshop-style education: practical and interactive knowledge transmission, with more hours in the field, and regarding this, having more practical experience than hours of theory in the class. Besides, mathematical knowledge is mainly transmitted as applicable theory and socio-cultural aspects are integrated in the development of new forms of farming.
2. The combination of conventional and ecological education in the same school in parallel programs, especially because younger generations are more and more interested in alternative ways of farming.
 3. Close collaboration with community and municipality to develop activities to the general public, such as planting, collecting mussels and shells, environmental education, as well as cultural festivals.

Taking into account the increasing challenges related to the transition from conventional to OF, it was mentioned that not only the technical and economical aspects are relevant. Also the increasing importance of socio-cultural aspects were highlighted, such as animal welfare and environmental impacts. The presented case study appeared to be successful in the integration of all these aspects in their activity field.

Critical factors

In general the participants were highly interested in the school model and estimated it as transferable. Nevertheless they identified some critical factors that cannot easily be surpassed in terms of implementing such a school in Lower Saxony or in Germany. One critical point is the fact that in France the educational system is centralized and financial support is guaranteed from the federal government under the condition of following the specified “missions”. Germany has a decentralized system, for the curriculum and for the financial report. The public administration in Lower Saxony does not prioritize the development of an OF curriculum in the existing public schools. Reasons are the perceived powerful position of the conventional agriculture lobby and the lack of trained educators and teachers in organic farming.

In order to successfully replicate the educational model of the Lycee de Coutances the following conditions would have to be available additionally (the list is not-exhaustive):

- de facto versus seemingly existing time and flexibility for teachers to adapt the curriculum to students needs;
- de facto prevailing demand for OF education in rural areas, which may be smaller than the one prevailing in intermediate areas. It is perceived that the demand for OF education is mainly generated by newcomers.

Key issues and barriers

In Lower Saxony the majority of agricultural land is still conventionally farmed and the farms are bigger than in most other parts of Germany. Because of that, the demand for qualified employees trained in OF

is smaller than for conventional farming and integrated production. Consequently the apprenticeship job offerings as well as the number of apprenticeship candidates are mostly for conventional farming. Even though the demand for OF education is growing, mainly due to newcomers and younger generations, there is still not enough financial support from the state nor political willingness to develop the OF educational program. To be able to pursue the objective of improving the educational offering of OF, the support from higher government instances would be needed. The participants see this lack of support as a big hurdle. Along with the authorities, the participants also mention little interest in ecological approaches from farmers associations, existing conventional educational centers and school managements.

The easy accessibility for urban customers is still the most important selling point for organic products, because “people are not ready to drive to the countryside everytime they need to buy their food supplies and even less willing to live there’ (DE2-SC4-03). This fact clearly favors the development of organic farming in intermediate areas close to urban centers and not necessarily in rural areas, where most apprenticeship jobs are available.

In addition to the apparently most critical aspects related to the conflicts between conventional and organic farming, the following items were also discussed:

- financial support for students during the training period, higher apprenticeship salary;
- not enough places and offerings for apprenticeship;
- sluggish processes to establish a new school entity, in the case of starting from scratch - much easier would be to expand the current curriculum with integrated topics such as sustainability and OF;
- Although experiencing a revival in recent times, the food culture of “artisanal processing” is less popular in Germany than in France.

Proposed measures to overcome the obstacles identified

In addition to the long list of barriers, participants were also able to identify a myriad of potential solutions.

The bulk of solutions were aligned along the topic of partnership, network and collaboration. All possible types of collaboration were spontaneously mentioned, highlighting the benefits of collaboration for the different functional areas such as school financing, continuous education for teachers, quality control and program development, etc.

The proposed measures were:

- Intensify the collaboration with conventional schools, to develop an integrated curriculum covering both, conventional and organic farming. The word “ecologizing” the traditional curriculum was used (DE2-SC4-01).
- Promote an alliance of the existing movements with similar interests (e.g. regenerative agriculture, permaculture, Community-Supported Agriculture, biodynamic, vegan), to increase the strength and consolidate the intention around one voice, thus having more power to face the establishment of conventional agriculture.

- Strive for an alliance with the conventional agriculture lobby, involving the chamber of agriculture to jointly develop solutions for the OF education. Specific measures were proposed, such as to organize workshops and round tables with the chamber of agriculture, to promote creative concepts, innovation and collaboration with alternative movements.
- The identification of organic farms to become partners and develop supplementary school offerings.
- Partnering with foreign OF schools to foster exchange and innovation among the countries.

In addition to the dominant topic of collaboration, the continuous education of teachers in both segments was also mentioned many times. Attractive training and continuous education offerings for vocational school teachers in the conventional sector would help overcome the current barrier of unreadiness and unwillingness, as stated by one participant “conventional school staff need to get in touch with ecological content” (DE-SC4-05). This could be offered in a centralized manner. On the other hand, OF educators are mostly engaged in private schools and do not profit from the same benefits of public employees, e.g. not being paid for their continuous education efforts. Initiatives to address this issue should be put in place.

Further proposals were also mentioned and are listed below:

- i. Governmental financial support for adults interested in professional transition towards OF and an increased financial support for students during their education.
- ii. Provide conventional farmers with examples of successful conversion stories, in the form of the biographies of progressive, successful organic farmers.
- iii. Integrate organic agriculture as workshops within the conventional farm education program.

Lessons learned and recommendations

One of the key findings of the confrontation was the relevance of “collaboration”. The subject “education” in general, and organic agriculture education in Lower Saxony specifically is too broad and important to be addressed from one side only. We need alliances, partnerships and collaboration from all stakeholders involved, overcoming potential rivalries and competition between specific groups in order to generate integrative approaches and to maximize the positive outcomes of a transformation. This is perceived to be strongly influenced and pushed by the presence and will of newcomers.

Taking into account the high share of farmers retiring in the coming years, we also realize that authorities need to better observe the demographic evolution of the population in their specific districts, taking advantage of a potential high interest that newcomers show for farming and rural development. This should result in a consequent increase in the supply of services as required by this segment, thus increasing the attractiveness of rural areas for the settling of new generations. In the case of Lower Saxony the interest in OF education was attested by the majority of the workshop participants, not without a certain astonishment and disappointment about the disinterest of authorities in actively participating and co-creating a new scene for the future of sustainable agriculture. A balance between a top-down and a bottom-up approach needs to be achieved: there should be “train-the-trainer” possibilities, in

universities, schools and elsewhere, where the future educators are forming and emerging; a close look in the curriculum of universities should be systematically pursued, and content that aligns environmental, economical and socio-cultural new realities should be included. The pressure generated by the rising demand from the bottom needs to increase.

Finally, although we started the confrontation highly interested in the reaction of participants to the hybrid campus being practiced in the Lycee Coutances, with different education paths being pursued by students of different age groups and professional paths, we were surprised by the low appeal it has for the audience. Hybrid schools are very common in France, and are part of a tradition. As for Germany, exchange and cross-fertilization were not seen by the workshop participants as a natural result from the simultaneous presence and occupation of the same school buildings. The creativity and innovation arising from the Lycee Coutances can probably not be linked only to one factor and has to be considered as systemic. A multi-generation learning (high school, apprenticeship, career changer), a multi-curriculum offer (conventional, organic), and a collaborative education environment (school administration, students, authorities, community) are all under the umbrella of a highly “hands-on” learning method. Regarding that, the school resembles a big laboratory of ideas, operating as a workshop where different stakeholders can experiment and test new ideas, put them in place and verify its efficiency.

Further consequences for the context and potential next steps

The participants were one voice when they concluded that a “Bildungstag” - an education day-congregating educators from all orientations to discuss the future of agricultural education was an honourable objective to be set for the near future. Gathering representatives from all stakeholder groups on board, welcoming their perspective from the point of view where they currently are and working together finding ways to jointly achieve a sustainable transformation of the Lower Saxony and German rural landscape.

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