

The configuration of social sustainability within an organic dairy supply chain

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Abstract: *Although social values have always played a (implicit) role within organic farming, globalisation, conventionalisation and growing anonymity within the organic sector are threatening the fairness and social sustainability in organic supply chains. This contribution aims to analyse in detail different interpretations of the concepts of fairness and social sustainability. It takes into account the perceptions of stakeholders along a supply chain as well as their concrete actions. The empirical study focuses on organic dairy products in a regional supply chain in Tyrol, Austria. The data is based on a focus group discussion with consumers of organic dairy products as well as qualitative interviews with supply chain actors (farmers, processors, representatives of a marketing cooperative and retailer) conducted in spring 2009. The paper presents the results according to actor level, and continues with a vertical presentation of the different expectations of each actor. Results indicate that supply chain actors and consumers give differing interpretations of the concept of fairness, which overlap to some extent: Farmers and some processors point out the importance of fair prices for raw milk and a secure income to assure the economic survival of the farms. Representatives of the marketing cooperative and the retailer focus on relationships along the supply chain, which they maintain should be characterized by transparency and communication among all actors. All supply chain actors mention the importance of a high quality of organic product and the regional provenance of animal feed, raw milk and final product. Consumers discuss fair prices for local farmers, affordability and availability of organic dairy products and high quality, as well as regionality, transparency and trust.*

Keywords: *Fairness and social sustainability, interpretations of supply chain actors and consumers, organic dairy products*

Introduction

Social values have always played a (implicit) role within organic farming. Aside from ecological motives, organic pioneers such as Hans Müller and Rudolf Steiner have emphasized the importance of fair partnerships and cooperation along the supply chain in order to secure income and fair prices for farmers (Vogt, 2000). Based on these normative values, the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) formulated seven principles of organic agriculture in the late 1970s. One principle was devoted to social values, claiming that organic farming should allow producers to earn a living as well as provide an opportunity for personal development. (IFOAM, 1980 in Schmid, 2007) Since then, the principles have been adjusted several times. The last adjustment was approved in 2005, where organic values were formulated in four principles, one of which refers to fairness: *“Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.”* (IFOAM, 2009) A process of stakeholder consultation accompanied this adaptation.

The discussion about social sustainability started in the late 1980s, within the framework of the World Conference of Environment and Development of the United Nations. Sustainable development was defined as a *“development which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”*. (WCED 1987, 43) According to this definition, sustainable development refers not only to environmental concerns but call for a combination of ecological, economic and socio-cultural aspects of development. (Littig & Grießler, 2005) Analyzing the Bruntland definition of sustainable development, Littig & Grießler (2005) define social sustainability as the quality of a society, depending on the formation of nature-society relationships on the one hand and relationships within a society on the other hand. These

relationships are mediated by labour, which should be arranged in a way to satisfy human needs. However, the organisation of work has to assure the reproduction of nature and the delivering of normative values like, social justice, human dignity or participation. Therefore a set of indicators for social sustainability has to include the satisfaction of basic needs (education, housing, health), secure equal opportunities in education and gender equity and furthermore involve aspects of social coherence (integration into social networks, strengthening solidarity and tolerance). Schäfer (2007) conducted a survey (“regional wealth reconsidered”) where organic actors in the region of Berlin-Brandenburg, Germany were analyzed according to their contributions to “sustainable wealth”. Just like the Bruntland definition, sustainable wealth does not only include economic and monetary effects but also focuses on the impact of social and environmental services, which contribute to the well-being of a community. Results show that numerous organic actors contribute toward regional sustainable development. The areas analyzed include commitment within networks such as non-profit organizations or organic initiatives as well as social engagement such as mutual support in distress. Furthermore, organic farms contribute towards the diffusion of knowledge and experience by organizing open days or participating at local or regional festivals.

Within the framework of the CORE Organic Project “Farmer Consumer Partnerships”, Padel & Gössinger (2008) carried out a considerable investigation of the values which are related to the IFOAM principles of organic agriculture. The concerns of different stakeholders (consumers, farmers, traders, processors, organic certification bodies, organic organizations) were included. Regarding the principle of fairness, concerns such as fair and equitable financial returns for farmers and affordability and availability for consumers are mentioned. Furthermore, stakeholders’ views on social issues, such as food safety and quality, a safe and equitable working environment, transparency and trust are implied within the fairness category. Other social concerns such as skills, knowledge and information and civic responsibility are classed within the care principle. Additionally, Padel (2008) discovers that Austrian producers mention food quality, environmental protection and independence as the three most important values in relation to organic agriculture.

This paper aims to analyse the perceptions and expectations of fairness and social sustainability of different stakeholders in a dairy supply chain. Farmers, processors, representatives of a marketing cooperative and a supermarket chain retailer were analysed to assess how far their interpretations of social values correspond to concrete actions and behaviour within the supply chain. The paper continues by analysing to which extent interpretations of supply chain actors correspond with consumers’ expectations with regard to the fairness concept.

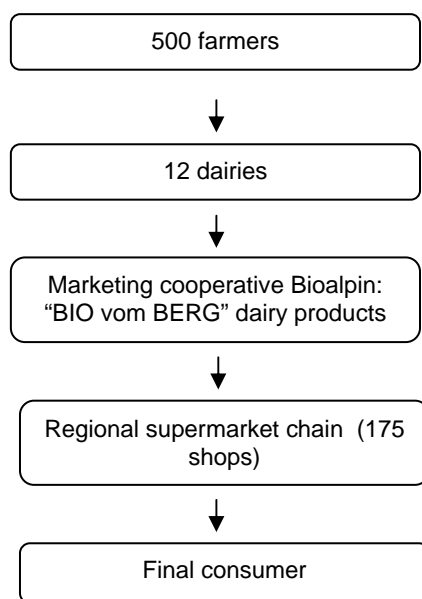
The paper is organized as follows: The following section presents the dairy supply chain of the case study and gives a short overview of the methods used. The results described in section three are presented according to actor level (farmers, processors, representatives of the marketing cooperative, retailer, consumers). They describe their interpretations as well as their behaviour concerning fairness and social sustainability. The paper concludes in section four where supply chain actors’ perceptions of fairness and social sustainability are compared to consumers’ expectations, leading to correspondences and deviations.

Methodology

The case study “BIO vom BERG”

For the empirical study, a supply chain for dairy products known as “BIO vom BERG” (organic from the mountains) from the Tyrol region of Austria was chosen. “BIO vom BERG” is the brand name of the Bioalpin cooperative, founded in 2002. The cooperative’s objective is to promote the marketing of organic products on a regional level. Unlike most other organic Austrian brands for dairy products which are owned by the large supermarket chains, “BIO vom BERG” is a producer brand. Most of the (approximately) 50 shareholders are farmers or small sized processors (dairies). Today, more than 80 different products such as dairy products, fresh meat and meat products, bread as well as fruits and vegetables are marketed under this brand. The dairy product range includes fresh milk, yoghurt,

butter and numerous varieties of cheese. Products are produced under the regulations of the largest organic association in Austria, BIO AUSTRIA.



Source: Personal communication

Figure 1. The supply chain “BIO vom BERG”.

Figure 1 shows the dairy supply chain of “BIO vom BERG”. Organic milk is produced by an estimated 500 organic farmers in the province of Tyrol. The milk is then processed in twelve independent dairies, most of them organized as small cooperatives. Eleven of these are also members of the marketing cooperative Bioalpin, where all products are labelled and sold under the brand “BIO vom BERG”. Bioalpin itself cooperates mainly with a regional, family owned supermarket chain, which runs about 175 stores in three Austrian provinces as well as South Tyrol in Italy.

On their homepage, Bioalpin communicates the “BIO vom BERG” brand as “*the brand of regional organic mountain farmers*” (Bioalpin, 2009). Direct and equal partnerships between agricultural producers and retail chains are made possible by the fact that the umbrella association represents micro and small sized farms and processors (Bioalpin, 2009). The main research question was therefore to see which social values play an important role within the “BIO vom BERG” supply chain. In addition, the role of the organisational structure seemed to merit deeper investigation.

Data

The material presented here is based on qualitative interviews conducted with eleven supply chain actors and a focus group discussion with consumers in spring 2009. In total, four farmers, four processors, two representatives of the marketing cooperative and one retailer were asked for their perception of fairness as well as specific actions supporting social sustainability within the chain. Interviews were conducted using semi structured guidelines in order to make facilitate comparability. Nevertheless, open questions were formulated to avoid a predetermination of the topic (Lamnek, 1995). Two organic ‘pioneers’ as well as two farmers who recently converted to organic farming were chosen as interview partners. Two of the processors interviewed exclusively sell organic milk; the other two processors sell both organic and conventional milk products. The manager and the chairman of the cooperative Bioalpin were also interviewed. The supermarket chain was represented by the purchaser for dairy products.

Data in relation to consumer perceptions were collected during a focus group discussion with Tyrolean consumers of dairy milk products. A focus group discussion aims to identify the opinions and experiences of the individual participants on a given topic (Morgan, 1999). For our focus group,

nine consumers (five women and four men) were invited to express their expectations and interpretations of fairness and social sustainability within a typical organic dairy supply chain. No reference was made to any brand in particular in order to keep the discussion as general as possible.

All interviews as well as the focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method according to Mayring (2003). The analytical method of structuring was used, where specific aspects are filtered out of the data.

Results

This section presents the results according to actor level, following the supply chain through from farmer to consumer.

Farmers

When asked for their interpretation of the fairness concept, farmers emphatically point out the importance of fair prices for raw milk to assure the economic survival of the farms. Fair producer prices should at least cover the higher costs for organic and (sometimes) silage-free production. This is only possible if farmers can supply their milk to a dairy where organic and conventional milk is processed separately. Some farmers mention that this is not the case everywhere within the province of Tyrol. They furthermore hold the view that adequate prices for raw milk also express society's appreciation for high-quality dairy produce which is described as a key concern for social values. All farmers refer to the regional provenance of animal feed in relation to the fairness concept. Hay should be produced on-farm; concentrate feed should be of Austrian origin. They underline that this is generally normal practice within organic agriculture, though not always within conventional farming.

All farmers agree that prices for raw milk are currently not perceived as fair. Reasons given include low prices for raw milk on the market for (conventional) milk products as well as high production costs for organic and silage-free milk.

Most farmers emphasize the amicable and good relationship between the dairy and the farmers. They perceive the dairy cooperative as their 'own' business. Farmers (or rather an elected committee) are very often involved in the strategic decisions of the dairy. Some farmers claim that small scale cooperatives provide a means of participation and information to the farmers and support their identification with the business.

When farmers speak about social criteria regarding work, they point out the importance of society's appreciation for their high-quality organic and silage-free milk. Most farmers perceive that this is currently not recognized by society due to the small pricing difference between conventional and organic dairy products. However, some farmers experience social recognition through direct marketing and direct contact to consumers. Others point out the high degree of independence they experience through their work and the possibility to provide their own family with healthy food. Farmers do not refer to the working conditions of employees. This might be due to the fact that most farms in Tyrol are run as a family business. Employees are therefore quite unusual within the regional milk production sector.

Only one farm family analyzed is aware that they perform educational tasks through their engagement in direct marketing. In their view, direct contact with end consumers is the best opportunity to convince the public about the advantages and values of organic agriculture. Other farmers are involved in the local committees of organic organizations.

Processors

Most of the processors interviewed are managers of micro or small sized dairy cooperatives, whose shareholders are farmers. Therefore, all processors mention fair producer prices for their suppliers when asked for their interpretation of the fairness concept. In return, the farmers' price demands must be adjusted to the market situation. Processors also highlight the high product quality delivered by the farmers on the one hand and the appreciation of this quality by the end consumer on the other hand. One processor mentions social aspects regarding work in relation to employees, however he did not elaborate on this point.

According to the farmers' statements about milk prices, most processors agree that they are currently unable to pay fair prices to their upstream partners. However, they perceive the prices received from their downstream partner, the cooperative Bioalpin, as being fair. All processors indicate that low prices from other commercial customers result in a huge diluting effect. This is ultimately why milk prices for farmers are forced downwards.

When processors talk about their relationships along the "BIO vom BERG" supply chain, they very often point out personal contact and regular communication with their downstream partner, the Bioalpin cooperative. They maintain that this is due to the small structures and the direct participation in the marketing cooperative. In addition, some processors agree that there is a strong interest for regular and open contact on the part of the manager and chairman of the Bioalpin cooperative.

Processors inform their shareholders (farmers) about strategic decisions concerning the dairy at the annual plenary meeting. However, numerous informal information structures are mentioned during the interviews: small structures promote direct and informal contact between processors and farmers. Nevertheless, the involvement of farmers in everyday business and strategic decisions depends strongly on the position of the farmer within the dairy cooperative (e.g. chairman versus simple member of the cooperative).

There are substantial differences on the processor level regarding the communication of the values of organic agriculture as well as social engagement. Those processors who exclusively process organic milk show more engagement in the communication of organic values than others. Social engagement appears by way of networking within different organic organisations as well as training courses for pupils and interested consumers, presentations and open days for end consumers.

All processors exclusively process milk from local farms and point out that, in their view, regionalism is strongly linked to the fairness concept. Most of them argue that regional provenance of raw milk primarily supports personal contact with the shareholders and is a sign of solidarity with local farmers.

Representatives of the marketing cooperative

When asking representatives of the Bioalpin cooperative for their interpretation of the fairness concept, they again mention the problem of low milk prices for farmers in the province of Tyrol and point out that one of the cooperative's purposes is to attain appropriate prices for their shareholders. However, the manager and the chairman of the cooperative are convinced that higher prices have to be accompanied by high-quality and innovative products. Otherwise, processors and farmers would have to depend on consumer solidarity to buy organic dairy products at a higher price. Furthermore, the manager emphasizes the importance of open communication with their upstream (processors) and downstream (retailer) partners in relation to quality, costs and prices as a precondition for the realization of fair prices.

Representatives of the marketing cooperative mention that they pay fair prices to their upstream partners as well as receiving a fair price from the retailer. These statements are in accordance with their upstream and downstream partners. The manager of the marketing cooperative describes the relationships as being open and on a partnership-basis. Besides the annual plenary meetings, the

cooperative tries to send out a newsletter to all shareholders once a month. In addition, they stay in contact with their suppliers and their largest customer on a regular basis.

The cooperative tries to communicate organic values such as support for small structures, farms and processors, high quality products and the reduction of food miles via their brand “BIO vom BERG”. Furthermore, a large organic festival is organized once a year, involving both processors and retailers. The chairman of the cooperative also plays an active role within several organic and conventional agricultural associations.

The results indicate that the manager and chairman of the cooperative have a clear idea of how to implement social sustainability within the supply chain. The concrete actions and statements of their partners indicate that their efforts are effective. The role of the Bioalpin cooperative regarding social sustainability within the supply chain “BIO vom BERG” can be summarized as follows:

- Due to regular contact with processors, Bioalpin knows about production costs and the prices required by their shareholders to stay in business.
- At the same time, the Bioalpin cooperative supports processors in developing innovative, special and high quality products, which succeed in the market place. Bioalpin also takes over quality assurance tasks in relation to the retail partner.
- The cooperative acts as an interface between the processors and the supermarket chain, maintaining an open relationship between the twelve dairies and the retailer. This facilitates the optimization of product quality and products range.

Retailer

When talking about the fairness concept, the retailer points out the regional provenance of dairy products. As a result, the value added remains in the province and jobs are secured. This interpretation of fairness reflects the supermarket chain’s efforts to position itself as the largest supplier of regional products in the province of Tyrol. However, the retailer adds that selling regional products implies a willingness to buy them on the part of consumers. Therefore, prices for dairy products have to be orientated towards market prices and cannot be set individually. To realize fair prices for agricultural producers, the retailer suggests limited pricing pressure for upstream partners (Bioalpin cooperative). On the other hand, the retailer expects fair price demands from the suppliers.

The retailer is convinced that the prices currently paid by the supermarket chain are fair for all upstream partners. If this was not the case, the brand “BIO vom BERG” would no longer be in existence.

Relationships with the Bioalpin cooperative are described as being communicative, open and based on partnership. The retailer emphasises that the relationship with the cooperative differs significantly from other business relationships: as examples he mentions several projects aimed at expanding the product range and promoting sales, carried out jointly by both the cooperative and processors of “BIO vom BERG” products. The retailer is convinced that the efforts to market regional organic products are one type of contribution to social sustainable development in the region of Tyrol.

Consumers

The perceptions and expectations of consumers with regard to social values were collected during a focus group discussion, referring not to a specific brand such as “BIO vom BERG”, but rather to the general supply chain for organic dairy products.

Consumers mention affordability and availability of organic dairy products as one aspect of fairness. They appreciate the fact that organic products are no longer reserved for well-to-do people and are

now available in most Austrian supermarkets. Additionally, eco labels assure the consumer that dairy products are produced and processed using GMO-free and organic ingredients.

As expected, participants discuss prices for organic dairy products by referring exclusively to fair production prices for local farmers. All consumers in the group believe that farmers do not receive fair prices for their products. Some participants agree to pay a higher price for fair dairy products, attaching some conditions:

- Regional provenance: The majority of the consumers define ‘regional’ dairy products as coming from the province of Tyrol.
- High quality of dairy products: Some consumers mention GMO-free products and organic origin as minimum quality standards; others demand fresh milk (no extended shelf life milk) and silage-free milk.
- Transparency: Consumers require a guarantee that only farmers will profit from the higher price in the form of a higher price for raw milk.

These additional requirements indicate that the argument for a fair producer price is not enough for consumers to pay more for a dairy product. Consumers also give preference to high-quality dairy products and regional provenance. Furthermore, the discussion indicates the importance of transparency, trust and honesty within the supply chain. Participants of the focus group discussion state that these values are especially supported by personal contact and communication. As the majority of organic dairy products are sold via conventional distribution channels such as supermarket chains, consumers doubt that fair prices exist within a dairy supply chain. Most of them suspect retailers of utilizing market power against their agricultural suppliers and putting pressure on farmers and small processors.

Consumers also link the fairness concept to aspects of environmental protection and animal welfare. All participants agree that these aspects are present within a supply chain of organic dairy products and refer to the strict organic regulations and production standards in Austria. They appreciate the reasoning behind the rejection of genetically modified organisms and the careful handling of nature and soil for the benefit of future generations. Furthermore, consumers are aware of the services provided by the organic farming sector and appreciate the farmers’ educational efforts concerning natural production cycles and traditional processing.

Comparison and consequences

To compare the consumers’ expectations to the different interpretations of the supply chain actors’ regarding fairness and social sustainability, we summarize the points mentioned by each actor level in seven categories. Categories have been developed by investigating different schemes for fair and social indicators within organic sector in Austria and Germany (e.g. Verein “Bestes Bio-Fair für alle” 2007, Naturland 2009, fairea GmbH 2009; Fair & Regional Bio-Berlin-Brandenburg 2007, Bio Austria 2009)

Figure 2 shows that consumers and all supply chain actors except farmers are linking the high quality of organic dairy produce to the fairness concept. However, producing high-quality organic raw milk is self-evident in the opinion of the farmers interviewed. All quality requirements mentioned by consumers (freshness and taste, GMO free, organic) are entirely fulfilled by the actors of the supply chain “BIO vom BERG”. Innovative products are also mentioned. In addition, all stakeholders agree that the marketing cooperative Bioalpin performs a special role in delivering this expected quality to the consumers.

Actor Category	Quality	Fair prices	Communication & Transparency	Regionality	Social criteria regarding work	Social engagement	Fairness to Nature & Animals
Farmers		x		x	x	(x)	x
Processors	x	x	(x)	x	(x)		
Marketing Cooperative	x	x	x	x			(x)
Retailer	x	(x)	x	x			
Consumer	x	x	x	x		x	x

Categories marked with x are mentioned explicitly by the supply chain actor in question
 Categories ticked off with (x) are mentioned indirectly

Figure 2. The construction of social sustainability within an organic dairy supply chain: Interpretations of different stakeholders (source: own compilation)

The fair price category is discussed by all stakeholders, although with different connotations. Farmers in particular, in addition to processors, demand fair prices for raw milk in order to sustain the farming businesses within the mountainous area. However, some processors refer to additional requirements (high quality, market situation) which are linked to fair prices. Representatives of the marketing cooperative and the retailer prefer to focus on the formation of relationships and other requirements (e.g. high quality) to achieve higher prices for agricultural products in the market. Although fair prices for farmers are an important topic for all consumers, most of them think that fair prices do not exist within conventional marketing channels. Instead, they believe that all retail chains utilise their market power and put pressure on agricultural producers.

The next category summarizes all perceptions and expectations concerning communication among the supply chain actors as well as transparency towards consumers. This point is mainly discussed by the marketing cooperative and the retailers who both classify personal relationships and open communication as being part of the fairness concept. Farmers and processors do not explicitly mention communication as an aspect of fairness. However, when they describe their relationships with each other, direct and regular contact seems to be self-evident for most of them. Consumers refer to this category as well, preferring to concentrate on the importance of transparency. Personal relationships with farmers seem to be the most convincing way of assuring transparency and convincing consumers of fair relationships within a dairy supply chain.

The category of 'regionality' deals with stakeholders' statements which link regional provenance to fairness and social sustainability. The study shows that all supply chain actors mention regional provenance as one aspect of fairness by focusing on the next stage upstream: farmers emphasize the importance of regional animal feed including hay and concentrates, processors and representatives of the marketing cooperative mention the regionality of the raw milk, the retailer and consumers consider the regional provenance of the final good. Some differences in their argumentation can also be determined: farmers and one processor refer to solidarity and support for local farmers. Most processors think that regionality supports personal contact with other actors, which in turn supports trust and mutual understanding within the supply chain. The retailer refers to the value added, which maintains jobs and supports sustainable commerce within the region. Furthermore, regional provenance is expected by all consumers of the focus group discussion when talking about the fairness concept. Therefore, the category of regional provenance is highlighted throughout the chain.

The category of social criteria regarding work is mainly discussed by farmers and some processors with respect to social recognition of the farmers' work. Some farmers recognize that due to low prices and insecure income, they do not perceive their work as fulfilling. The indirect nature of the supply chain does not allow communication of appreciation from consumer to producer. Thus the producer price also has to serve as a measure of social recognition.

The social engagement category summarizes the services of organic actors which contribute to a social sustainable development. It includes engagement within organic networks, educational work as well as the communication of organic values to end consumers. As expected, nearly all supply chain actors mentioned different kinds of social engagement, ranging from organic networks to educational and information work through direct marketing, holding lectures or organizing open houses and festivals. However, they rarely link those social services to the social sustainability concept. Consumers, on the other hand, acknowledge actions of social engagement on the part of organic actors.

Fairness to nature and to animals is related both to animal welfare and to the conservation of natural resources. The focus group discussion has shown that ecological aspects play an important role for consumers when buying organic products. In this regard, 'green' arguments are very often linked to the argument of "fairness to future generations". Farmers additionally mention that small scale organic farms usually treat their dairy cows in a particularly animal friendly way by avoiding intensive concentrate feeding and paying attention to animal health and vitality beyond the scope of regulations. Hence, farmers as well as consumers are convinced that this category is satisfied within the organic milk production chain.

Conclusions

To summarise, the results suggest that there are different appreciations of fairness and social sustainability along the organic dairy supply chain under investigation in this paper. Fair prices seem to dominate the discussion across all actor levels. Also Sobczak and Burchardi (2006) bring forward evidence of the importance of fair financial returns for farmers. However, in relation to the fairness concept, stakeholders also place importance on aspects such as regional provenance, quality and fairness to nature and animals. Whereas regional provenance is first of all classified within the ecology argument (reduced transport), Austrian stakeholders very often link regionality to improved communication within the supply chain, trust-building and support for local markets. Padel & Gössinger (2008) support these findings.

Results show that direct and regular contact, personal relationships and joint efforts to solve problems promote trust and perceived fairness within the supply chain. The interviews suggest that there is a strong connection of these effects to scale. The investigated supply chain consists of rather small-scale cooperative dairies. Relationships between farmers and processors are characterized by face-to-face communication. Most farmers have a feeling of ownership and can participate in decision-making. Relationships are similar for the downstream and upstream partners of the Bioalpin cooperative. Everybody knows each other quite well on a personal level. It appears that the regional embeddedness of the supply chain is a crucial feature to trigger and support all aspects of fairness mentioned in this paper.

However, statements from farmers to consumers indicate that contacts must not be limited to those of the immediate upstream and downstream partner: Some farmers would appreciate direct contact to consumers in order to receive non-monetary feedback as well as to support the communication of organic values. Consumers note that transparency is communicated through personal contact with farmers and processors. As direct contacts between farmers and consumers are limited in indirect supply chains, the umbrella cooperative has an important task in finding ways to support such contact and to act as a transmitter of values and feedback between farmers and consumers. Thus their linking role would be extended from linking the processors to the retailer to also linking farmers with consumers. This would imply more involvement from farmers (who are not direct members of Bioalpin, but rather indirect members through their dairy) into the communication of "BIO vom

BERG". In the long run, the success of the supply chain is dependent on the degree of ownership that farmers feel over the final product on the supermarket shelf.

While the investigated supply chain shows a wide array of aspects connected to fairness, it must again be acknowledged that "BIO vom BERG" represents a special case, due to its strong regional embeddedness. It must be stressed that the results cannot be generalised. Further comparative studies are needed to see how applicable the results are to other indirect organic supply chains.

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