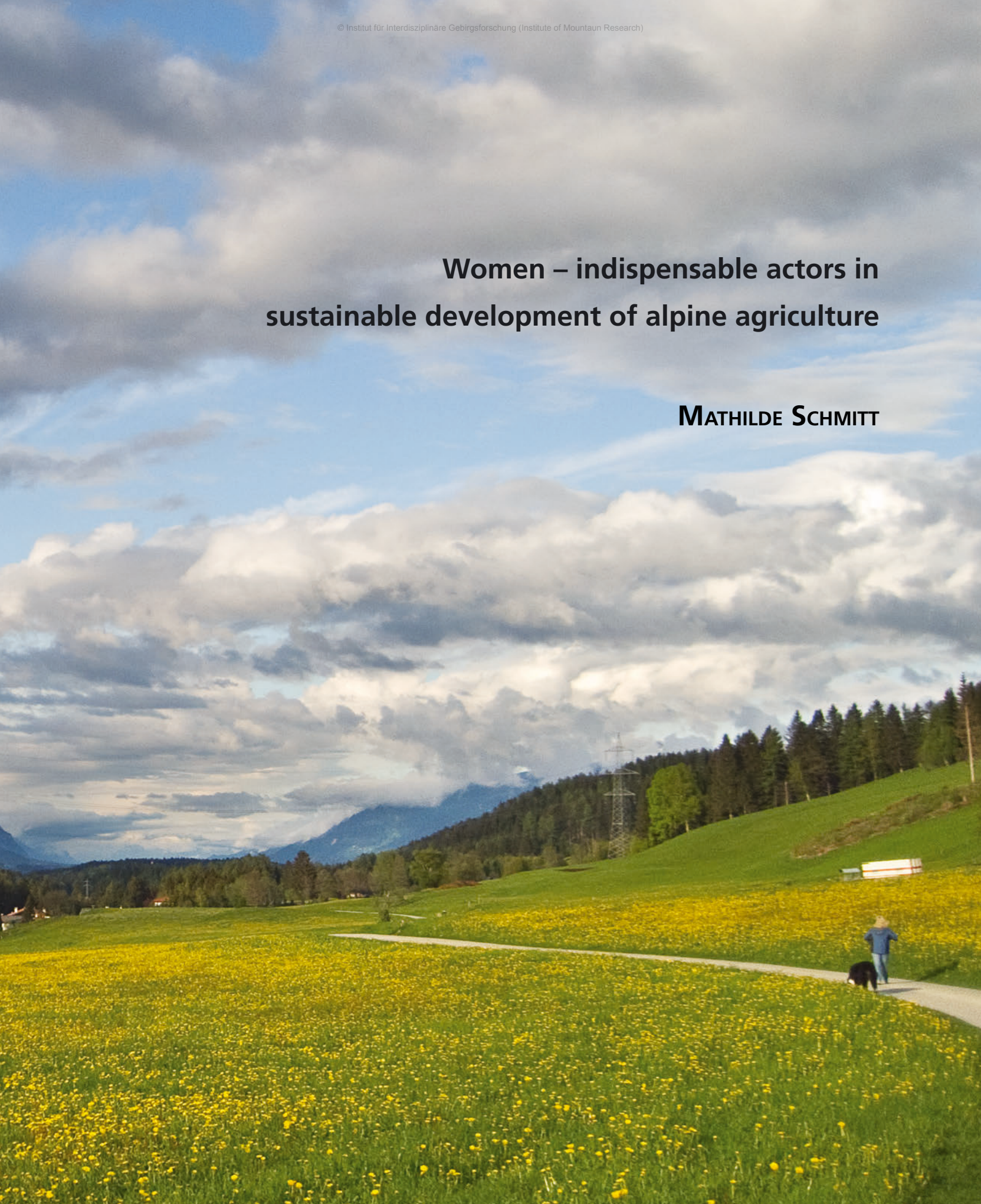


Women – indispensable actors in sustainable development of alpine agriculture

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Introduction

The position of women in agriculture has improved for at least two decades so that now they are seen as a promising factor in agriculture and as a motor of rural development. This re-evaluation of the role of women was put in writing and ratified by many nations at the 1992 Conference for Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, where it was expressed in the so-called Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Article 20 of this declaration points to the vital role women play in managing and developing the environment and calls for the broad participation of women in sustainable development (Rio-Declaration 1992). Rural women and female farmers have also been given more attention in the political discourse within the European Union. “The future of the rural regions depends to a large extent on the role delegated to women”, according to a report written for the European Commission in 1994 (Flesch 1994). Years later, this importance is underlined by local experience in Austria: “In many initiatives and local LEADER+ action groups, women are very active members. Therefore, the influence of gender should not be missed in rural development measures.” (Wiesinger 2008: 33)

In many alpine regions, mountain farming plays a key role in safeguarding the living and working space as well as the sensitive ecosystem. The initiative SARD-M (Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Mountains) was started to strengthen the multifunctional use of European land and enjoys broad support by local governments as well as the FAO. Upland farms in mountainous countries like Switzerland, Austria (see for instance Fig. 1) or Slovenia usually show “strong multifunctional tendencies”. This concept implies “a re-valuation of existing farm household knowledge” (Wilson 2008: 371) that usually means women’s knowledge. Farming women appear to represent multi-functionality in agriculture in a special and specific way. The German Nutritional and Agricultural Policy Report (Bundesministerium für Verbraucherschutz, Ernährung und Landwirtschaft, Berlin 2003: 65) states that women



Fig. 1: Part-time mountain farm, Innsbruck Land. Photograph by Ismail Do 2009.

secure the existence of their farms and strengthen employment and the economy of rural regions, with rural women regarded as trailblazers in the dialogue between producers and consumers.

The study presented below will highlight this assessment with selected cases. It represents a concept of multifunctional agriculture with strong support by the farming woman. The investigated strategy aims to engage in pluriactivity by increasingly diversifying the farm family’s income to make the household less reliant on the farm’s commodity production income and subsidies. Besides, it shows opportunities for supporting sustainable regional development. The study follows the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) and integrates qualitative and quantitative research methods by triangulation. The complex aspect of agency, the approach of farming women to the challenges of everyday operation and business development can only become clear through theme-centred interviews and through analysing stories of successful and failed projects.

Case study Hannah S.

When we interviewed Hannah S. in 2009, she was 51 years old, married and had three grown-up children. Her husband worked part-time for an insurance company as well as on the farm. The twofold strategy in the socialization of their children had proven successful. Despite their vocational orientation outside the farm, the three children maintained their bonds with the farm and helped whenever they were needed. Hannah S. was an open-minded, well-respected and self-confident woman: *“One has to know for oneself what’s important. Every farmer should decide independently about his way of farming and take the great responsibility for it.”*

Though trained as a primary school teacher, Hannah S. introduced herself as a farming woman. Soon after obtaining her certificate as a teacher, she had married a farmer whose small, highly diversified farm was situated in a mountain village in Innsbruck Land district. She had grown up on a nearby farm. In the beginning, she, her husband and her mother-in-law had shared the farm work. After giving birth to three children in short succession, she had taken on the main responsibility for raising them and keeping the house and garden. When the children had gone to high school, she had professionalized her knowledge about farming, gardening and home economics and finished with a master degree.

Since then she has officially leased her husband’s farm and taken over the farm management. Although her aspiration had been to become a teacher, she learned to enjoy being a farming woman. Hannah S. identified herself strongly with the farm, she was especially proud to be her ‘own master’ and to realize her own ideas. *“There is more awareness about it. Suddenly you think, these are my cows, these are my pigs. (...) The biggest change then was the fact that I succeeded in standing my ground vis-à-vis my mother-in-law”*. A precise and clear division of labour as well as separate apartments in the farmhouse enhanced better cooperation between the two women. After many years of struggle within the family, they converted to organic farming and increased direct sales of products from the farm, such as milk and



Fig. 2: Children explore a farm practising free-range animal husbandry. Photograph by Mathilde Schmitt 2009.

eggs. Customers included not only people from the vicinity but also hiking tourists passing by. In addition, the business benefits from Hannah S.’ increased engagement in local politics, the farming women’s association and the parish. It has also been participating in several EU support programmes.

With the millennium, Hannah S. took the chance to diversify the household’s income further and included two other farm-based activities: organizing children’s birthday parties and the farm as a classroom (Fig. 2).

Both are three-hour programmes with a break for which she prepares a snack of home-made cookies, juice and other processed farm products. *“I like children very much and I like to pass on what we take for granted but others also would like to experience and to know. I think I’m good at it”*. Being open-minded and very flexible helped her greatly with her new job. And she could make use of her knowledge of concepts, didactics and rhetoric from the teacher training. At an advanced stage of her life, Hannah S. succeeded in weaving together various strands of her biography. And the development did not stop there. Last year, the regional tourist association asked her to offer guided farm tours for foreign tourists which she accepted to do occasionally.

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Carving out the women's spheres of action

The biography shows that Hannah S. and her family have coped successfully with the restructuring of agriculture. Even during the decades of “grow or go”, the desire for autonomy and self-determination – for van der Ploeg (2008) an essential aspect of peasant farmers’ agency – continued to be the driving force that gave direction to the woman farmer’s actions. In contrast to the business strategy of specialization, recommended by the farming advice services of the state, Hannah S. favoured the advantage of diversification and pluriactivity as a strategy to keep the farm going. Several farm-based activities were combined into a form of cross-marketing. It is worth noting in this respect that Hannah S.’ customers and the membership network of organizations and associations overlap. Good networking in associations – you can also call it embeddedness – could thus have synergy effects for farm-based activities like direct marketing, and vice versa.

In other places in the Alps, agriculture has also become “eco-social” since the end of the 1980s and displays “multifunctional attributes, (...) For the start-up of this dynamic process of pluriactivity and diversification many incentives and innovation came from farm women.” (Oedl-Wieser 2007: 61) The development towards pluriactivity in agriculture is also apparent in the Trentino, Italy: “(...) new niche sectors are emerging (...) furthermore, there is a growing level of economic integration between businesses, as in the case of agritourism, school farms and the transformation industry” (Marchesoni & Gretter 2007: 23). The observation that the women are more sensitive towards new ideas and products has been confirmed by other researchers (Boenink 2004; Rossier 2009).

Haid & Haid (1998) went ahead and enthusiastically declared, “Everywhere in the Alps it’s women, farming women as pioneers and as leaders of innovative initiatives: like the “small cookery book” of the French Alps, initiatives of the TRIGLAV national park in Slovenia, the Ötztaler Bauernfrühstück (breakfast with farm products for hotels) in Austria or like the ones of Traudi

Schwiebacher, a farming woman from Ultental, South Tyrol, who initiated several projects of processing farm products but also for improving the local infrastructure” (Haid & Haid 1998: 246). These farming women did not only show resilience but also initiative and the sense of innovation required for a sustainable development of alpine agriculture (Schermer & Kirchengast 2006). The women’s ability to adapt their farm businesses in a broad variety of ways based on the many options of combining farm, farm-based, farm-related and off-farm activities reflects the farm families’ great flexibility in coping with the challenges of globalization and contributing substantially to farm-based rural development.

With regard to this kind of pluriactivities, Inhetveen and Schmitt (2004) have broadened the concept of feminization of agriculture. They emphasize the female farmers’ ability to draw on knowledge and skills they have gained through education and experience as well as to identify and exploit earning opportunities in the tertiary sector by professionalizing their activities on the farm. With regard to the increasing importance of farm-based activities, I would like to follow researchers from South Tyrol and Switzerland and stress the fact that to prove successful, the farm families’ adaptation skills must be accompanied by emancipation from the traditional gender roles (Matscher et al. 2008) and a certain degree of gender role flexibility (Rossier 2004). This kind of feminization of agriculture tends to equalize relationships and, as a result of public esteem, shifts power relations on the farm in favour of women. Men are challenged to rethink their identities. It appears that reorganizing the division of labour in agriculture is much easier than redistributing power between men and women (Schmitt 1997).

The European Commission itself has argued that it will not be easy to attain the goal of gender equality in rural development (European Commission 2000, according to Eccher 2007: 89). “Women are thus generally poorly represented in politics but this is especially true for the rural areas. The social acceptance of women in such positions and functions is still very low in most Austrian regions” (Oedl-Wieser 2007: 56). As a con-

sequence, even in the 21st century, decisions in agrarian politics, rural development and infrastructure are strongly influenced by men and their interests.

Regional development supported by a well-balanced partnership of agriculture and society

When the farming family presented here opens its farm and shows their mainly urban visitors the values of agriculture and rural life, they play an important role for mutual appreciation and understanding of nature and cultivation, producers' and consumers' interests, indeed for integrating the rural and the urban. "School goes to the farm" activities¹ have turned out to be a good opportunity for supporting sustainable development in many ways. They are aimed at promoting socio-cultural sustainability and education for sustainable development by improving knowledge among younger and older children about the relationship between agriculture, nature and society. Although the young people often live close to the mountains with access to nature in their vicinity, they do not have any links with farming people. And they do not know in detail where their apples, milk and potatoes are coming from. At the same time, the farming people achieve closer contact with the community and additional income. According to van der Ploeg, agriculture and society are becoming linked in new ways, which opens the possibility to unfold "new cultural capital" (van der Ploeg 2008: 122). With regard to the developments of the current adventure and event society, this could become essential for the socio-cultural sustainability, if not for the cultural reproduction of alpine regions (Hanzig-Bätzing & Bätzing 2005: 194).



Fig. 3: Outlook on life: urban or rural? Photograph by Ismail Do 2008.

The necessity of integrating young women

At the beginning of the 21st century, the challenges for rural areas in alpine regions increased further. Young women these days tend to have very good qualification levels and to leave regions that do not provide adequate workplaces or they refuse to return to these regions after having completed a higher education in town (Fig. 3). One of the consequences of this trend is a growing "surplus of men" in the important age groups concerned with establishing a partnership and starting a family. Austrian experts who participated at a DELPHI study within the INTERREG IIIB project DIAMONT were also much more sceptical about the cultural and socio-economic than about the ecological sustainability of the alpine regions (Bender 2006: 119). A similar tendency has been registered in Italy. Trentino was the Italian region where the male/female ratio was the most unbalanced (Zucca 2006: 5) Gretter sums up the consequences, "Without women it is hardly possible to prevent the depopulation of mountain villages and this for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because they are in charge of procreation. Secondly, because women, far more than men, have helped to preserve the traditional, identity-related economy, and the local, alpine

¹ In Austria in the 1990s, several federal ministries jointly initiated the project "Schule am Bauernhof" (Farms as Classrooms). Almost at the same time, similar projects started in other European countries like Germany, Norway and Switzerland.

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environment. Women are also more likely than men to pursue further education and training that prove valuable in terms of sustainable development” (Gretter 2007: 2). Financial support alone does not seem to be responsible for the differences in demographic patterns of alpine regions. Rather, it has to be combined with socio-cultural aspects: “This is a clear indication that South Tyrolean policies targeting the strengthening of local identities have been most successful. It is not just a matter of financial resources. The Aosta Valley has received an even greater amount of subsidies, but this has not reversed the downward-spiralling trend” (Zucca 2006: 30).

Sylvia Yanagisako, an American anthropologist, in her research about the silk industry in the Como region, Italy, points to a positive consequence of these developments, “Demographic shifts worked along with changing gender expectations to place daughters in management positions previously reserved for sons or nephews. (...) an increasing number of firm owners began to revise their gender expectations or at least to suspend them in an effort to give daughters a chance to prove themselves” (Yanagisako 2002: 164–165). It does not have to mean that daughters will be made heirs but there are now “more chances that parents would hand over the family business to their daughters” (ibid.: 109) – in spite of the patriarchal desires for male succession and the dominant ideal that men strive to attain. There is reasonable ground for hope that the contradictions and conflicts which exist between the postulated equality of men and women in the professional world and the way families organize themselves, will decrease (Appelt 2003).

Conclusion

Given the increasing uncertainties of a globalized economy, farm-based activities represent a successful combination of resources and an interesting work-life-balance concept for farming families. When we look closely at the individual level, we can see that the women in

this process (re)act not only as crisis managers. Their involvement should also be understood as a desire for self-realization and for realizing their creative potential as well as their social competence. This might also be an attractive perspective for well-educated young women.

Beyond the added value produced on individual farms as well as in the agricultural sector as a whole, there are several signs that this specific unfolding of the available resources might contribute to the quality of life in rural areas as perceived by rural dwellers and as a consequence will also secure endogenous regional development.

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