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Working in Regional Agro-food Networks – Strengthening Rural Development through Cooperation

Abstract

Regional agro-food networks have an impact on the development of rural regions. Networks give small and medium sized enterprises the opportunity to gain access to further markets (e.g. through offering a wider common product range), to conduct more effective marketing or to synergize the variety of skills and know-how of the network partners. Networks of the agricultural and food economy are also seen as a chance for rural regions because they can positively influence social and cultural lives as well as the natural and economic areas in regions.

We analysed regional networks of the agricultural and food economy, investigated the strengths and weaknesses in the structure of agro-food networks and developed options for action to strengthen the collaboration within the networks and their regional marketing.

In our paper we present the results of one case study in Eastern Germany. We show our findings of a strengths and weaknesses analysis and a constellation analysis. Therefore, success factors were identified and used to evaluate the networks qualitatively. In addition, we discuss how regional networks can support regional marketing and sustainable regional development.

Keywords: agro-food networks, regional marketing, sustainable regional development.

Rural Regions and Sustainable Development

In 1989 the border between Eastern and Western Germany opened and led to German reunification. Consequently, in East Germany a transformation from a socialist to a capitalist economy took place. Rural areas were especially overstrained with this rapid restructuring. More than 20 years later it can be observed that there is still a big difference between East and West German rural areas.

The German National Strategy Plan for Rural Development 2007–2013 characterizes German rural areas as villages or small towns structured with a generally low population density. The strategy emphasizes the East/West gap, and stresses that the sparsely populated rural regions in Eastern Germany still lose more population than Western ones. The structural proportion of agriculture and the average farm size is also larger. In general, the economic power will be created even less by agriculture and forestry in the future, thus a further decline of employment in the agricultural sector is to be expected (BMELV 2009: 28–25; see also OECD 2007; Laschewski 2009).

In order to address these problems, rural regions develop various strategies for rural development. In doing so, sustainable development, as a political and normative orientation that combines social questions with questions regarding nature and environmental compatibility of economic activities, is one of the main premises of rural development (Mölders et al. 2012: 96; see also Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005, article 3; Kratz and Hamm 2010: 33). The preservation of natural and societal livelihood is of central importance for the concept of sustainability. To complete this task in addition to a common consideration of ecological, economic and social developments, the participation of different actors on decision processes and the orientation on equity principles is decisive (Mölders et al. 2012: 96). Sustainability "is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987: Part I. 2.).

The implementation of sustainable development at regional level is called sustainable regional development. The regional level is seen as an important competence and solution area for sustainability, because connections are more visible and therefore comprehensible and it is easier for people to

assume responsibility (Hilligardt 2002: 25). There is no generally accepted definition for sustainable regional development (Conrad 2007). However, it is characteristic that sustainable regional development wants to achieve an interrelation of social and economic claims on space and their ecological requirements. It aims to construct regional viable structures by using existing endogenous resources in regional material cycles and supply chains and an increasing regional autonomy and stability as well as supporting ecologically compatible products and production, typical for the region and strengthening regional networks and cooperation with synergy effects between regional actors (Winkelmann 2011: 17–19, Conrad 2007: 77–78, Tischer et al. 2008: 36, Kratz and Hamm 2010: 33). These aims demand intensive communication and cooperation between enterprises, consumers, administration and social groups in networks or informal structures to develop common sustainable solutions (Tischer et al. 2008: 28).

Regional Agro-food Networks to Support Regional Marketing

Agro-food networks in rural regions

The term 'network' is used in different fields – for example in planning, economics, legal and social sciences – in different ways (Bommes and Tackes 2006). In the context of rural development there is no clear definition of networks. In our study we refer to networks as a sociological term as it is used in modern sociological network analysis. Here networks are seen as an additional level of action coordination among individual or corporative actors (Jansen 2006: 11). Networks are defined as a quantity of actors (but also events or objects) and the relations between them (Jansen 2006: 58). In networks the enhancement of social capital is of great significance. According to Putnam social capital 'refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1995: 67; see also Coleman 1990). It results from interactions between various actors and offers both individual and corporative actors more opportunities for action (Jansen 2006: 26).

Regional networks are important for the population and for the development of rural regions. The social capital of these networks is

therefore particularly suited to develop actor interactions as a resource for (sustainable) regional development (Elbe 2011: 215). Thus, the members of regional networks derive benefit from cooperation and communication because they can exchange infrastructure, share knowledge and help each other solve problems more easily (Segert and Zierke 2004: 254). Referring to the discourses of 'regional governance' (Broggi 2003; Fürst, Lahner and Pollermann 2005; Hammer 2001) combined with questions about the capacity of regions to react and manage their development (Frommer 2009), members of regional networks are empowered to promote regional and endogenous development potential (Biesecker 1996).

In particular, regional agro-food networks in organic and conventional agriculture focus on cooperation, customer orientation and sustainable agriculture and contribute to the sustainable development of rural regions (Marsden 1999, Seyfang, 2006; Sonnino et al. 2008; Psarikidou and Szerszynski 2012). They are often prime examples for the preservation of traditional products and modes of production and the support of regional material cycles and supply chains (Segert and Zierke 2004; see also Deutsche Vernetzungsstelle LEADER+ 2006; Kullmann 2007; DVL 2012). Thus, the networks are not only economic initiatives but also have a great influence on the social, cultural and ecological development of rural regions. To support these various objectives a powerful regional marketing that considers structures and relationships in networks, the marketing itself and the framework of the network is essential.

Advantages of Regional Marketing

According to the protected designation of origin (PDO), regional products have to be produced, processed and prepared in one geographical area (Council Regulation (EC) No 510/2006). However, in addition to regional marketing, these regional products have to be marketed in the local or neighbouring region, where they were produced (Dettmer 2006: 44). Regional marketing of food has a variety of advantages for producers, consumers, the environment and the region. SME have financial and social benefits (Anders 2006: 5). The high quality of local food and the choice of niche products enable a sales market at high prices. The products are fresher than imported agricultural products from other countries, which have to be harvested when unripe because of the distances. Due to the minimized

delivery distances, a regional contribution against the global climate change problem can be made (Ermann 2002: 131; Kullmann 2004: 3).

Rural areas can benefit from regional marketing. Rural areas are characterized by bad transport connections, many small and medium sized enterprises, many farms, and a high migration of young and qualified employees (Elbe 2008: 7). With the help of regional marketing new workplaces and economic power can be developed and maintained. Thus, the region can be strengthened and become more attractive to young employees. Participants of small regional networks are often active in social events and civil activities that foster the life quality of rural areas (Mölders 2008: 197–202; see also Thiem 2009). A regional agro-food network gives the members the chance to use a considerable amount of know-how. The exchange of experience, information and knowledge enable further development of the farms (Schäfer 2006). Based on mutual support, common marketing measures can be realized, new products developed, political lobbying promoted and reliable trading relations developed (Schmid et al. 2005: 60; see also Schäfer 2006).

Against this background, we want to investigate regional agro-food networks in order to describe their structures with the objective of creating options for action and giving an impulse for the improvement of processes in the networks. Furthermore, we investigate the potential of regional market structures in order to strengthen the distribution of the networks' regional products. In the long run, sustainable rural development will be promoted, and so the agro-food economy and the region itself will be strengthened.

Methodological Approach

To promote regional agro-food networks, we investigated the structure and regional marketing of three networks in a case study and developed them in a common process with the network members' options of action for further network management. For the analysis of the network structures and to evaluate the potential for regional marketing, various qualitative methods were combined.

Data was collected from over 30 interviews with different members of agro-food networks, such as producers, processors and distributors as well as members of NGOs, in particular key persons for the communication and

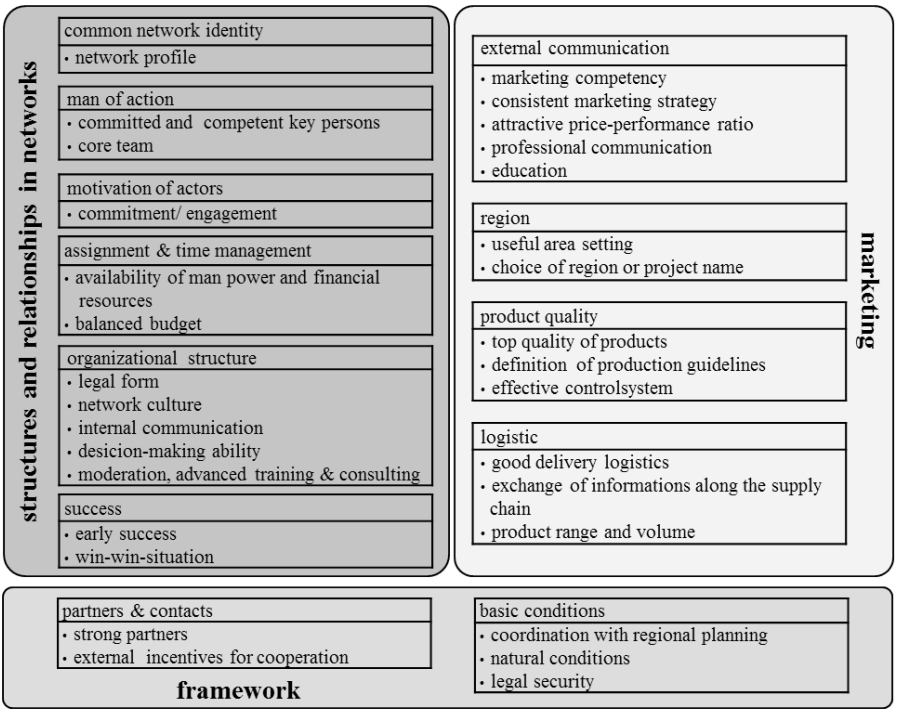
management of the networks were interviewed. Associated persons such as the staff of the municipalities or biosphere reserve administration were also included. Information from informal discussions and various types of text documents such as protocols, concept papers and newspaper articles were considered. In the interviews, questions regarding the relationship between the network actors, the strengths and weaknesses of regional economies and rural development were covered. Therefore, a problem-centred interview approach was chosen, because the interviews are motivated by theory but should also be open-minded with regard to new prospects, thus the increase of the user's knowledge is enabled by an interplay of inductive and deductive thinking (Witzel 2000). Interviews were transcribed and analysed with qualitative content analysis. The analysis offers the possibility of combining inductive development of categories and deductive application of categories (Mayring 2007).

Constellation analysis (CA) was used to analyse the network structures. CA is a bridge concept for problem oriented research and a new 'methodological approach designed to cope with complex situations' (Meister et al. 2005: 2; Schön et al. 2007). The assumption of the CA is that technical, natural and social developments are closely connected. For that, the CA identifies heterogeneous elements of four types: social actors, natural elements, technical elements, signs and symbols, and creates a cohesive cluster called constellation to bridge these different areas of expertise. The common discussion of the visualisation of elements and their interplays provide the basis for the systematic communication of all concerned parties (Meister et al. 2005; Schön et al. 2007: 47–53). With CA we could visualize the central elements of the investigated agro-food networks such as actors, their products and the structures of the networks, but also the framework in which the networks are embedded.

Based on these preliminaries a strengths and weaknesses analysis (SW analysis), following the SWOT analysis, was conducted. The SWOT analysis has its origin in strategic management and was developed to identify S-strengths and W-weaknesses of an enterprise or organisation (internal perspective) as well as O-opportunities and T-threats (external perspective) to create strategic solutions (Recklies 2000; BMI 2011). The analysis of SW deals with internal factors; the skills and resources of an organisation. A previous identification of the main success factors and an analysis of strengths and weaknesses in relation to these factors is helpful.

The OT part identifies opportunities and threats which arise from trends and changes in the environment of the organisation. External factors cannot be influenced by the organisation (Thompson and Strickland 1986; Recklies 2000; Inventool 2011). With the help of qualitative content analysis, the strengths and weaknesses evaluated the networks for their regional marketing potential along previously developed success factors. In our research we investigated the strengths and weaknesses of the networks regarding regional economies, the collaboration between network members, and their contribution to rural development. The potential for regional marketing in the region of Lueneburg was analysed in a less structured way.

Figure 1. Main success factors for regional marketing



Source: Own depiction, based on Hilligardt (2002), Teller (2005) and Kullmann (2007).

For the analysis main success factors of regional marketing networks were compiled using literature research. An essential basis was the set of success factors identified by Kullmann (2007), who analysed the optimization potentials of regional marketing in German biosphere reserves. His rather marketing oriented perspective was combined with Hilligardt (2002) and Teller et al. (2005), who fostered the sustainability perspective and focused more on the establishment of cooperation. These success factors were clustered into three categories and discussed with representatives of the networks prior to the analysis phase. The cluster 'structures and relationships in networks' (on the left side in Figure I) target the orientation and aims of the network, as well as the behaviour of the actors and their interactions with each other. The topic 'marketing' (on the right side in Figure I) embraces the economic perspective, whereas 'framework' (on the bottom in Figure I) focuses on the legal, political and scenic conditions. A condensed overview of the success factors is shown in Figure I. Finally, the results were presented and reflected in workshops with members of the networks and recommendations for action were developed.

Introducing the 'Ark Region Amt Neuhaus – Flusslandschaft Elbe'

The 'Ark Region Amt Neuhaus – Flusslandschaft Elbe' is currently an informal regional network of stockmen who keep endangered livestock. The farmer network was founded in February 2011. In spring 2012 more than 60 stockmen held 46 different livestock of the German Red List of Threatened Species of the Society for the Conservation of Old and Endangered Livestock Breeds (GEH) (Blank 2011). The network receives support from the GEH, the biosphere reserve administration 'Niedersächsische Elbtalaue', the adjacent municipalities, the Farmers' Federation and many more. The initial point of the network is the protection of diversity of livestock breeds, but it also focuses on the preservation of peasant farming by establishing new sources of income. Therefore, they are currently establishing a common marketing policy for animal products. The Ark Region Amt Neuhaus – the first German Ark Region – is part of the Ark project of the GEH. The GEH is the only association that promotes the on-farm conservation of traditional and threatened livestock breeds at

German national level. The GEH Red List of Threatened Species includes more than 100 endangered livestock. The object of the GEH Ark project is to maintain endangered species in agricultural production, to use their performance and special potential and thus to ensure their conservation in the long-term (GEH 2012). In terms of the rules of the GEH, more than four farms with endangered breeds of livestock have to work together in an Ark Region towards the goal of familiarizing the public with the situation of endangered livestock (ibid.). One slogan of the GEH is 'conservation through use'. Thus, by processing and selling their products, the network members want to preserve endangered livestock breeds. To spread the idea of an Ark Region, the members of the network also offer tourist attractions. To coordinate their efforts, the members of the network meet at irregular intervals to exchange information about the animals, organize courses about animal husbandry and exchange animals.

Amt Neuhaus – the core of the Ark Region – is part of the Biosphere Reserve of Elbe River lands. 'UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are model regions for sustainable development. They protect biodiversity, support regional marketing and promote low-impact tourism, as well as innovative, environmentally friendly agriculture' (Möller 2007). In addition, one objective of Biosphere Reserves is the conservation of biodiversity. For this reason the Biosphere Reserve administration supports the Ark Region Amt Neuhaus – Flusslandschaft Elbe (Biosphärenreservat Flusslandschaft Elbe 2012).

The area of the Ark Region is divided by the River Elbe – the former inner-German border. The municipality Amt Neuhaus is located on the eastern side of the river. Until 1945 Amt Neuhaus belonged to the Federal State of Lower Saxony, and thus to the region of Lueneburg. After 1945 it became part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and belonged to the district of Ludwigslust. Following a referendum in 1993, Amt Neuhaus transferred back to the Lueneburg region and Lower Saxony.

The agricultural structure on the eastern side of the Elbe is still influenced by the socialist system of the GDR era. Because of the high pressure to join the Agricultural Production Community (LPG), independent farming was almost impossible. The land was integrated in the LPG successor farms. Thus, 20 years after the unification of Eastern and Western Germany, the characteristic 'elements of the current farm structure in East Germany are firstly, the continuation of a comparatively small number of very large

agricultural enterprises which came into existence mainly as successor enterprises to agricultural production co-operatives (LPG). They usually manage more than 800 ha. Secondly, there are a continuously increasing number of highly professionalized enterprises of varied legal status, which are large (200 to 500 ha) by international standards. Finally, we find numerous smaller, part-time family farms. More than 50% of the farms use less than 50 ha' (Laschewski 2009). Amt Neuhaus, as a region in the old border area, is dominated by smaller, part-time family farms that kept livestock – often endangered livestock – for their own use, and sold the meat and other livestock products on the farm. For that reason, the LPGs have not played a decisive role for the Ark Region. Expanding traditional livestock farming and receiving the acknowledgement of the first Ark Region in Germany was obvious (Heckenroth 2011).

Analysis of the 'Ark Region Amt Neuhaus – Flusslandschaft Elbe'

Constellation Analysis of the Status Quo of the Ark Region

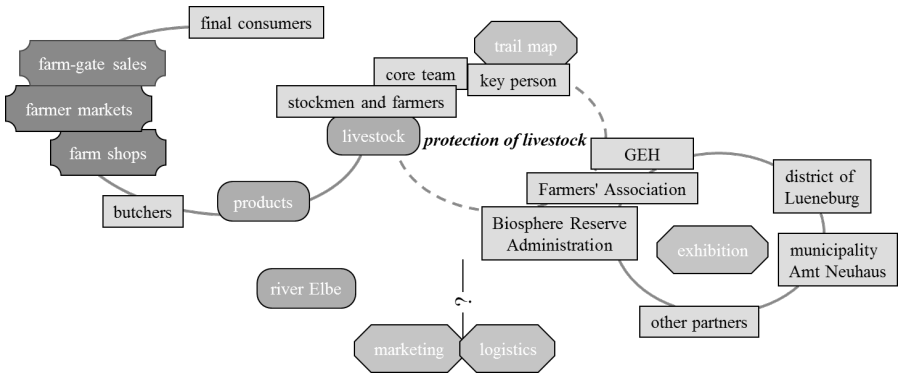
The constellation analysis figures out the structure of the network and external factors concerning the network. In the CA of the status quo (Figure 2) you can find all the aspects of the network which influence the common work and regional marketing of the network. The rectangular symbols visualize social actors (e.g. persons or groups) in the network, the trapezoids are signs or symbols (e.g. standards, laws, current political or social concepts), the oval ones are natural elements (e.g. air, water, landscape etc.) and the last are technical elements (e.g. hardware, power stations, objects).[1]

In the middle of the constellation in Figure 2 lies the network with its members, the stockmen and farmers, the GEH, the Farmers' Association and the Biosphere Reserve. The network is ruled by one key person, supported by a core team. On the left side of the constellation lies the actual value chain: from the stockmen, to the butcher, to the final consumer via

[1] cf. http://www.konstellationsanalyse.de/english/ka-sinn-und-zweck-english.html

farm shops, farm-gate sales and farmers' markets. The exhibition about the Ark Region, which is planned by the district of Lueneburg, the municipality Amt Neuhaus, different network members and other partners, is located on the right side of the constellation. It is obvious that common marketing or logistics in the network are still non-existent. Furthermore, the river Elbe has an important influence on regional marketing, as described below. It is attractive for tourists but is also a natural border. It is remarkable that the constellation consists of three circles, which are all connected by the circle in the middle – the network of the Ark Region. However, the network circle is perforated. This symbolizes the missing internal communication and organizational structure. Thus, so far there is nearly no connection between the stockmen and partners around the exhibition. In addition, common marketing and logistics remain non-existent.

Figure 2. Constellation of the status quo of the Ark Region



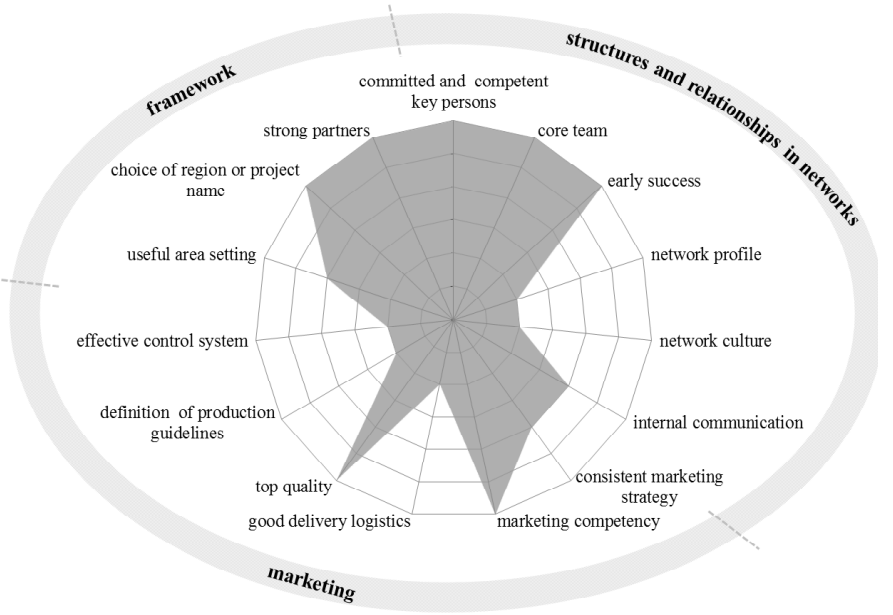
Source: own depiction.

Strengths and Weaknesses Analysis of the Network

Following the CA of the status quo, for a deeper understanding we completed an SW analysis of the network. Figure 3 gives an overview of the most important strengths and weaknesses of the network Ark Region which are described below. In accordance to the success factors we rated different aspects of the network. For demonstration and communication we visualised the SW analysis with a circle. The network has strengths in

those factors when the colour is on the outside of the circle, and weaknesses when it is contained inside the circle.

Figure 3. Strengths and weaknesses of the Ark Region



Source: own depiction.

Concerning our success factors of '**structures and relationships in networks**', especially in young networks, a strong key person is important to create and develop the network. The key person in the Ark Region is also the founder of the network. His activity for the network is diverse: he motivates new members, supplies new domestic animals for members, organizes information events for external persons and members, builds new contacts with important people in the region, and works on marketing for the network. After a while he was able to inspire many farmers and supporters to promote the object of protecting endangered livestock. The key person does not have a lot of experience in marketing food products. He develops a trail map, on which all farms will be mapped (cf. Figure 2). However, the focus is on information regarding endangered animals and

tourist attractions in the region, not on the marketing of products. A key person alone cannot run a whole network with more than 60 people. In the Ark Region network there is a core team to support the key person in different working areas. The core team consists of one farmer who wants to promote the marketing of the network, a farmer who acts as speaker for the network e.g. in newspaper articles, and a woman who is a journalist, lives in the region and writes articles about the network. The large number of interested people and members of the network can be seen as an important success concerning the structures and relationships of the network. A network culture, such as regular meetings of all members, or a system for internal communication, remains elusive. Many members do not know who the other network members are, and there is no exchange of information about the products offered by different members. The network is still a loose group of Ark stations with no common profile.

Concerning '**marketing**'**,** the network is still in the early stages. Some of the farmers work on a common marketing strategy. But the members market their products themselves using direct marketing through direct sales from their farm, in farm shops or farmers' markets in the region. Most of the products are bought by final consumers (cf. Figure 2). Only one farmer also sells his products to local and regional restaurants. To establish common sales of the products is one objective of the farmer. One farmer will take over the marketing of the products. He is competent in the field of marketing because of his former job. He wants to buy the animals, or the meat, from the farmer of the Ark Region, process the products and sell them via regional markets, regional gastronomy and/or an internet shop. But a common marketing strategy or common logistic does not exist. They are still working on questions as to which products should be marketed at which target group, which modes of transport should be used, and what communication methods are best. The quality of the products by the Ark stations could be classified as high. The taste of the meat of the old species is specific. Thus they have a unique sales proposal. However, there are no specific product guidelines. There are guidelines concerning the livestock breeds which are controlled by an external organization (the GEH), but there are no guidelines on animal husbandry, production or marketing. One of the strengths, as well as a difficulty, of the network is the location near the river Elbe. On the one hand, the river is well known in Germany and the area attractive to tourists. With the name of the river

in the network name, a geographical localization by external persons is possible, and identification for the inhabitants of the region is given. On the other hand, the river is like a border. The municipality Amt Neuhaus remains relatively unknown on the western side of the river. The eastern part of the Elbe the region is very sparsely populated, which means that the sales market is not attractive. The network has to use the sales market in the north-east of Lower Saxony. Furthermore, the butcher is on the western side of the Elbe.

Concerning the success factors of the '**framework**' of the Ark Region, we found that the network has strong partners, like representatives of the administrative district and the community, the German Farmers Association or the Biosphere Reserve Administration 'Niedersächsische Elbtalaue', which support the objectives of the network. The partners help the network with financial support and development of an exhibition (the Ark Centre) on endangered domestic animals. This exhibition will contain further information about animal products. In addition, in the building hosting the exhibition, there will be a shop for Ark products.

Summarizing the results of CA and SW analysis, a lot of our prescribed success factors are already reached by the Ark Region. The network has a single, very active, person as the motor of the network who is supported by a core team, which also has to take on the task of network management. A key person is very important in a young network in order to motivate the members, build new contacts with partners and promote the network itself (Böcher 2009: 134; Kullmann 2007: 20). However, the key person has to be supported by a core team to distribute the different tasks (Teller et al. 2005: 91). An internal communication system is important for a network to exchange information about news, problems or suggestions for changes in the network (Teller et al. 2005: 90). The CA showed that a good communication system does not yet exist. Regarding the framework, the network has already had its first success. According to Böcher (2009: 134) first successes are important, for example convincing critical people to promote the aims of the network.

The most important success factor in the field of marketing is the quality of the products of a regional agro-food network (Asendorf 2003: 68; Kullmann 2007: 35), which is achieved by the network members. The study of Kullman (2007: 34) shows that with specific and controlled product guidelines, a regional food network has more credibility. The

Ark Region does not yet have guidelines for the production and selling of products. In addition, the network doesn't have a common marketing strategy in which they describe 'what product should be marketed to which target group, via which distribution channels, at what price, with which transport, and with which communication' (Kullmann 2007: 31). According to Hilligardt (2002: 162) the name of the network is important for success. A geographical localization by external persons and identification for the inhabitants of the region has to be given. The Ark Region accomplishes these success factors.

Regarding the framework, good relationships with strong partners in a regional agro-food network are an important success factor to gain financial, political and content-related support (Böcher 2009: 134; Hilligardt 2002: 139). Therefore the network is well-positioned in the region.

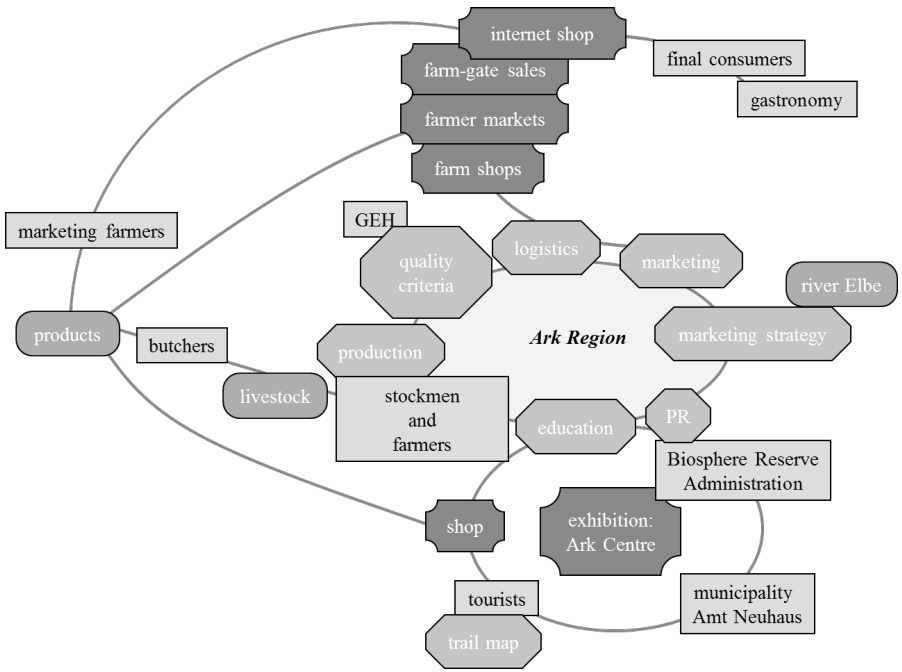
One Desirable Constellation of the Network Ark Region

Based on the CA of the status quo and the SW analysis, we made one possible and desirable constellation for the Ark Region (Figure IV). In this constellation, the network of the Ark Region is in the centre of the constellation. The former perforated connection between the members is now closed by regular meetings, e-mail contact and working groups for different topics concerning the network. The different fields of activity of the network are marketing, production and education. The educational part is covered by the exhibition (Ark Centre) which is realized by the partners of the network. In the Ark Centre there is an exhibition for tourists and inhabitants, as well as a program of courses for the holders and farmers. Furthermore, there is a shop in the Ark Centre where the farmers can sell their products.

Production is still a task for the farmers. They keep animals on their farms and deliver them to the butcher. There is a butcher on the eastern side of the river Elbe. Products are then returned to the farms to sell them as before. However, a portion of the products are sold to the farmer in the network who oversees the marketing for the whole network. He buys the products the other farmers have not managed to sell. He then sells those products to tourists and inhabitants via an online shop, or to local and regional restaurants. To guarantee the quality of the products and use the unique selling proposition, the network has implemented

a system of quality criteria, which directly refers to the criteria of the GEH. Thus, the possibility is given to prove both criteria by the GEH as an external organization. In the marketing strategy they use their unique selling proposition and their location near the river Elbe in the Biosphere reserve. The Biosphere Reserve Administration still works in the field of public relations for the network.

Figure 4. One desirable constellation of the Ark Region



Source: own depiction.

With the help of the CA, in combination with the SW analysis, we worked with different network members to develop a strategy for the network concerning their internal structure and marketing. Thus, we could verify our analysis and the network could potentially identify important options for action. In workshops with several network members, we generate options for action with the group of participants. One option is to establish a clear marketing strategy which includes the river Elbe as a regional and

natural speciality, and which stresses the unique selling proposition of the animal products of the livestock breeds. Another is the implementation of good internal communication by regular meetings and working groups to different topics. Apart from those recommendations, we developed other options for action which would go beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

In the paper we could demonstrate that firstly, the developed success factors and the methodical approach are useful to support regional marketing networks, and secondly, that regional marketing can contribute to rural development.

In our research we developed new and adapted existing success factors for regional marketing networks. These success factors were used for a strengths and weaknesses analysis of different networks, inter alia the network Ark Region Amt Neuhaus – Flusslandschaft Elbe. It has been shown that these success factors, in combination with the SW analysis, provide a framework for scientific research, as well as practice to evaluate the current status of the networks extensively.

For each network, two constellations were visualized. The first constellation was for the development of a shared understanding of the system, the status quo of the networks, the second constellation mapped one desirable future constellation. These constellations provided a good overview of the network structures and facilitated through the visualization tool the communication with practitioners. Together with the SW analysis it formed a good basis for transdisciplinary discussion to process possibilities and options for action for the future orientation and strengthening of the networks.

In summary, the methodical mix offers good opportunities to develop manageable strategies for regional marketing networks, and is useful for both scientific analysis of networks and for the cooperation of independent work of the practitioners – as feedback from the practice showed.

In the specific case study we found that the network Ark Region Amt Neuhaus is generally well positioned. The described deficits in network structures and the marketing of regional products may be a result of its recent setup. Nevertheless the members of the network are actively engaged in developing both, and in summary there is a high potential in the network

to become a successful regional agro-food network. In this specific case we could obtain workable solutions to support the network.

Focusing on the interactions between network members, as mentioned in sociological institutionalism, the goal of this network isn't only economic efficiency, but the maintenance of endangered livestock, and with that, the strengthening of local economic cycles. Thus, regional networks, like the Ark Region Amt Neuhaus - Flusslandschaft Elbe, target sustainable development of rural areas, not only by better use of endogenous resources, but also supporting regional autonomy and stability through intensive cooperation.

Especially in Eastern German areas, like Amt Neuhaus, which are dominated by small, part-time family farms that produce agricultural products for direct marketing and are generally affected by problems like migration, discontinuity of business, loss of infrastructure and thus are categorized as under-developed regions, the strategy of marketing regional products through networks seems to be promising for sustainable rural development.

However, cooperative regional marketing cannot be taken for granted for a rural development. Too often it can be observed that networks cannot exist on their own after a period of high EU funding. Specific competences are required for the development of the networks. Our success factors serve as an orientation for the development and maintenance of regional marketing networks. Based on this, a targeted evaluation, intensive consulting, and also scientific support can be quite helpful in strengthening the networks' potential.

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