MOVING
MOuntain Valorisation through INterconnectedness and Green growth

Policy Brief

AUSTRIAN ALPS | Sheep farming in the region of Weiz

Photo credit: Sandra Karner

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MOUNTAIN VALORISATION THROUGH INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND GREEN GROWTH

Sheep farming in the region of Weiz

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Summary

Sheep farming on alpine pastures does not only serve the production of food but contributes to biodiversity, the preservation of cultural landscapes and heritage and is highly embedded in the regional development. Through cooperation and regional development, it is possible to preserve the small-scale sheep farming practices in the area. In the light of future challenges frameworks need to be built and further expanded to preserve the viability of sustainable farming practices and to enhance the adaptive capacity of alpine pasture farming.

1. *"What one cannot do alone, many can"*

The value chain is situated at the south-eastern edge of the Austrian Alps, in the region of Weiz. The region of Weiz is characterised by an Illyrian climate. Summers are mostly hot and dry with a very high propensity for (thunder-)storms. The latter is supposed to become stronger in the course of climate change increasing the number of lightning strikes, hail and the thread of floods.

In the mountainous areas of the Weizer Bergland region pasture farming with cattle and sheep for meat, milk and dairy production prevails. The sheep are herded on alpine pastures or on meadows at an altitude of 400 to 1270 metres above sea level. Sheep farming also contributes to the preservation of the cultural landscape by protecting it from encroachment especially at steep slopes. Consequently, pasture farming contributes to the touristic attractiveness of the region as well. Sheep farming in the region of Weiz has been a tradition for centuries, even serving as staple food until the end of the 19th century. After sheep farming became increasingly less important in the middle of the 20th century, some

Figure 1: Typical small sheep herd, 20 dams in average, grazing on summer pasture

Key Policy Messages

- ☞ Cooperatives strengthen collective efforts and innovation capacities
- ☞ Diversification of marketing and products strengthens economic resilience
- ☞ Cross sectorial integration strengthens value chains
- ☞ Knowledge exchange and networking for integrated regional/rural development enhances value chain embeddedness
- ☞ Contribution to biodiversity and preservation of cultural landscape

innovative sheep farmers pushed a revival of sheep products in the beginning of the 1990s, and they started to successfully market high quality lamb and sheep milk products cooperatively.

2. Value chain contribution to resilience and sustainability

The founding of the Weizer Schafbauern cooperative had been an important initiative to secure the persistence and viability of sheep farming, which is characterised in the region by small-scale extensive farming. Through the cooperative joint and professionalised processing, joint marketing product diversification and fair prices are guaranteed. Even though only 10% farms of the cooperative are certified organic, they are committed to high animal welfare standards and ecological sustainability characterised by extensive pasture farming, and domestic GMO free feed, which is mainly produced on-farm or at least regional. The extensive grazing of the sheep contributes to the stabilization of the vegetation cover and to the improvement of the water storage capacity of the soil. Furthermore, sheep are especially suitable to protect steep meadows from encroachment which fosters biodiversity rich meadows and the preservation of the cultural landscape. Those are also key aspects of the Nature Park Almenland which covers an area of 25.300 ha. The specific soil and climatic conditions result in a flora that is characterized by a great variety of alpine plants. Closely connected to the cultural landscape and the nature park are touristic activities around education and awareness raising as well as the cultural identity in the Almenland region.[1]

3. Policy experiences

Historically the region faced various challenges such as bush and wood encroachment of alpine pasture areas, migration of workers, marginalised tourism, and bad infrastructures. Therefore, the 'Regional Community Initiative Almenland' was funded in 1995 within the LEADER II program. Since then LEADER did and still does offer essential support for the regional development in that area.

The embeddedness in the joint LEADER region 'Almenland & Energieregion Weiz-Gleisdorf' is fruitful for the sheep farming cooperative in several aspects. For instance, the Local Action Group supports economic activities that contribute to climate protection and adaptation as well as environmental protection and ethics. Examples are funds for infrastructural investments, the support in the marketing of food quality products, such as the label "Määh" of the sheep farmers from Weiz. Additionally, Natura 2000 areas in the Nature Park Almenland were established to foster biodiversity and tourism. Furthermore, alpine farmers can apply for funding from a funds for forestry, the 'Waldfonds', equalisation supplement for disadvantaged mountain areas, direct payments including coupled support (Almauftriebsprämie) and funding for measures within the ÖPUL program like 'Alpine Pasture Management' and 'Animal Welfare Management'.[1,2,3,4]

4. Recommendation for future policies

In the current LEADER period and the regional development strategy various

strategies on EU and national level were considered like the Biodiversity Strategy 2030, ÖREK 2030, CAP 2023-27, Masterplan for Rural Areas, Plan T-Masterplan Tourism and the Alpine Convention by strengthening several aspects: awareness for organic agricultural production, stronger coordination between direct marketers and producers and increased visibility of them, the development of new concepts for visitor guidance incl. strengthening sustainable and active mobility, the preservation of Natura 2000 and nature park areas[5]. The relevance of these aspects can be supported by MOVING findings concerning the relevance of a soft tourism strategy as well as the need for supporting direct marketing of locally produced agricultural products. Regarding funding translated from the CAP, a stronger focus should be set on small family farms and alpine farmers. More concretely, within ÖPUL multiple services provided by organic and especially pasture farming should be more considered, e.g. through a further improvement of the pasture payment, which could stop the recent trend of increased stabling in the region. Furthermore, the compensation payments for disadvantaged regions should be further tailored to support small farms. This would contribute to a general appreciation and valuing of high quality agricultural production and related ecosystem services. Also the forest funds should be further developed to support climate change adaption. A stronger link of food production systems and their impact on ecosystem and natural resources is needed. Awareness raising campaigns as well as the integration of agriculture and food subjects into the educational system can support the recognition of sustainable farming practices as well as improve consumer awareness.

In order to increase the adaptive capacity knowledge creation and exchange should be fostered through vocational trainings with experts, exchange within and beyond the value chain, adapted educational programs, and tailored consulting due to the heterogeneity of pasture properties and associated impacts of climatic change. Future policies should enable a framework for implementing the creation of a knowledge base, cooperation and innovation in order to deal with future challenges.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

[1]*Naturpark Almenland*

[2]*Waldfonds*

[3]*Informationsblatt- Almen und Gemeinschaftswiesen*

[4]*Zahlungen für aus naturbedingten oder anderen spezifischen Gründen benachteiligte Gebiete (AZ)*

[5]*Almenland& Energieregion – regional development strategy 2023-2027*

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