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INTERVIEW

January 2021

Shaping Transformation. Stronger. Together.: Hello neighbour! Best practices for regional networks and value added

- An interview with Tina Andres, Chairwoman of Erzeuger-Verbraucher-Genossenschaft Landwege eG

BIOFACH / VIVANESS 2021 eSPECIAL will be held from 17 – 19 February. In addition to exhibitor presentations and diverse opportunities for networking and virtual meet-ups, eSPECIAL will offer all participants the comprehensive, deeply knowledgeable programme of the BIOFACH and VIVANESS Conference. The main theme for BIOFACH 2021: Shaping Transformation. Stronger. Together. The main focus: how diverse social movements – and the organic food industry – can achieve their goals better by acting together.

In the fourth of a series of interviews that will appear regularly in the BIOFACH Newsroom (www.biofach.de/en/news) until mid-February, we spoke with Tina Andres, Chairwoman of the Erzeuger-Verbraucher-Genossenschaft (EVG) Landwege eG, an agricultural producer-consumer cooperative, about transformation in a regional context. Landwege is working with committed organic businesses in the Lübeck region, members of the cooperative, and more than 100 employees at five Landwege markets to carry out and shape transformation here.

The interviewer was Karin Heinze, BiO Reporter International

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Ms Andres, EVG Landwege traces its earliest origins back 30 years. Might you call it a regional transformation movement?

Tina Andres: Yes, absolutely. Our approach of encouraging organic agriculture, farming structures and socially aware jobs is aimed at ecological transformation. Landwege was conceived as a transformative movement from the very start. Customers view us primarily as an organic food retailer. But our members' self-perception, our aspirations and our objectives go far beyond that.

After all, Landwege arose as an aftereffect of what you might call a timequake – just as we're experiencing with the pandemic today – but in that case it was the Chernobyl disaster. In those days the worst source of uncertainty was that nobody knew how heavily the food that came into the shops from who knows where had been irradiated. The founders of Landwege, the "Parents for Unpolluted Food" initiative, wanted to take back autonomy about food sources and reclaim responsibility for themselves as consumers – just to know where their food was coming from. Their paramount goal was to bring unpolluted food into town from the local environs. Besides regional sourcing, the other focus has always been 100% organic quality, and together with that, encouraging organic farms and fair cooperation. Most specifically, that means that by 2019, one-third of Landwege's turnover of about 15 million euros was flowing back into the region. Ninety per cent of the more than 30 member businesses in the producer-consumer cooperative come from the immediate Lübeck vicinity, within a 30-kilometre radius. So that's how regional transformation works! The crucial point from our perspective is that everyone in the value chain gets their livelihood. Nobody in the cooperative can get enormously rich on this (and nobody expects to). We call our model an "appreciation chain". The values from those days, and the philosophy of a different way of thinking about business, oriented to the common good, support us and guide our actions. We feel a deep commitment to those principles.



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What basic components is the producer-consumer cooperative's model founded on, and what contributes to its success?

Ms Andres: The most important part of our participative approach is the farming businesses. We meet regularly to discuss strategies and objectives, along with needs, wishes, growth. Landwege is a marketing structure, and not an end in itself. We basically define ourselves as a farm store in town. The Landwege markets mean sales volumes and sales revenue for our farms. Working together to shape regional value added is at the top of the list. Along with our five Landwege markets, we've set up a preparation kitchen and a delivery service, and we took over a whole-grain bakery in Lübeck to open up even more possibilities. We view that less as an expansion than as a consolidation of our value chain, and a sensible linkage between merchandise flows and processing.

The backbone of it all is the cooperative. The company belongs to many owners; the objective under its articles of association is to promote organic farming in the region, and it's binding on us members. It defines what we do – far more than is possible for an independent entrepreneur. The cooperative additionally offers several economic advantages. We spread the risk and have good equity cover, because ever since the financial crisis, a lot of people have felt it's important to know what's being done with their money. Our very trackable, understandable scaling, our strong regional emphasis, and the familiarity of our member businesses make us transparent and credible. We enable customers to know where their food is coming from. That's what makes our company model so attractive to consumers who want to benefit not only from healthy food, but from personal contact with the farm, from preserving biodiversity in their region, from CO₂ storage in humus-rich soils, and much more.

Landwege sets a major emphasis on operating cooperatively. Customers are included, and also their families, their children – the next generation. Why?

Ms Andres: The cooperative was formed at the same time as the Landwege association, because education about ecology was also a major factor from the beginning. Today the association, Landwege e.V., is one of Northern Germany's most successful organisations for education on



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sustainability. The association's work includes teaching ecology to some 10,000 school children a year from Lübeck and its environs at "The Farm". We have good collaboration with the schools, and visiting the Landwege association is now a permanent part of most schools' curriculum. Nevertheless, we'd very much like to play an even bigger role in the curriculum, because that's where you can lay the foundation for transforming what people eat. Children naturally also carry our ecological ideas to their parents, and certainly prompt discussions about good food in many families. Landwege is really very well known in local homes. Unfortunately, we constantly also discover how little knowledge and awareness prevails in many parents' homes about where their food comes from. That's why we believe you just can't start systematic education early enough. Landwege also operates two kindergartens – and the waiting lists are a mile long.

Can the Landwege model, with its strong “regional value added” approach, be a viable alternative to our globalised world, and how can it gain further ground?

Ms Andres: We do offer a concrete alternative to globalisation, I can confirm that. Our model is conceivable only on a decentralised basis. I can't imagine Landwege as a franchise, because it simply has to be put into action authentically, on location. Authenticity and efficacy can't be scaled up infinitely. As I see it, we need to conceive and implement more small and medium-sized business structures as a counterweight to globalisation. That's because those smaller structures are intrinsically extremely effective and also add value, they're considerably more sustainable, and as a rule they're more socially aware than global structures. It really would be wonderful if regional models could spread and our concept would generate satellites. The interest is there. We're often asked to tell about the Landwege concept and to assist in founding new organisations. And in fact we're seeing a renaissance in the cooperative idea, as well as a number of new initiatives that are discovering the idea for themselves. Appropriate tax incentives could help with implementation here. But really the deciding factor with retail – both regionally and globally – is that we charge “true prices” for our food that take all the externalised costs into account. That would be a prerequisite for our alternative idea to gain a lot more ground.



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Obviously we have to do business cost-effectively, but we don't want to be concerned primarily with achieving the lowest possible prices, but rather with our values and with a transformation in farming and in food. Quite fundamentally Landwege says, we don't "haggle" with our farmers – we accept the price they need. As I already mentioned, our primary goal is to encourage diverse, ecologically sound agriculture in our region, on a fair basis. Our model of the common good is focused on providing adequately for everyone. We negotiate prices with farmers on the basis of needs, necessities and trust. The key factor is how the various partners in this business understanding view themselves. But what I seem to realise over and over again, and it really fills me with joy, is that in the organic food industry, what unites us above and beyond everything else is the will to change, to achieve social and ecological transformation.

Does the pandemic show us how forward-looking EVG's local supply model is?

Ms Andres: Yes and no. Certainly having 30% of our goods coming from the region provides a good, very stable foundation for a basic food supply. On the other hand, a lot of things would be missing from our product range if we couldn't import anything any more. But I was surprised at how much demand there was among people for regional foods during the first lockdown, even though at no point did we have to reduce our range of international products. I felt there was a shift in awareness, and a revival of interest in recipes made from regional ingredients. In any case, we have no competition in terms of supplying local organic products, and thus we're "pandemic-resistant".

To what extent has Landwege made the region more ecological, and is that getting recognition – for instance, from people in government?

Ms Andres: People are very much aware of our activities. We've won numerous awards and have been pointed out as a role model in a number of places, so we can be thoroughly pleased. We're invited to join advisory boards, and also to attend interregional workshops about raising ecological awareness and improving regional marketing. Landwege enjoys strong awareness, and that's very gratifying. Our work has direct effects, and it's



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also earning significant recognition beyond the organic food sector. We certainly have more organic farms than before Landwege was founded; some operations have switched over because they have a marketing opportunity by way of Landwege. Our member businesses are all in very good shape economically. I really wish that could also be made possible in other regions as well.

For myself, I can say I'm deeply thankful to be able to work for the cooperative. It's just so meaningful, and it stands for everything we in the organic food sector advocate – namely a change of course and a real transformation, which we urgently need. That goes far beyond making agriculture ecologically sound. It also raises questions about how we live together, about consumption, and so on. I find the extensive loss of boundaries in consumption alarming. Within the cooperative, that's scaled in a very healthy way, I think. Our model is authentic, trackable, transparent, and feasible within the bounds of our global resources. I'm glad this model exists, but also that more and more people are discovering, approving, and supporting it. We're driving the transformation as an entire sector.

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