

Success factors of organic marketing initiatives- A comparison of three regions in Austria

Erfolgsfaktoren für regionale Biovermarkter – Eine Analyse ausgewählter Vermarktungsinitiativen in Österreich

Norbert GLEIRSCHER

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit bäuerlichen Vermarktungsinitiativen, deren Zielsetzung es ist, durch die Produktion, die Verarbeitung oder den Vertrieb von biologischen Lebensmitteln, auch längerfristig bestehen zu können. Neben marketingrelevanten Überlegungen spielen vor allem auch regionale und umfeldbedingte Faktoren eine wichtige Rolle für das erfolgreiche Etablieren regional agierender Initiativen. Eine zentrale Fragestellung dieser Arbeit ist, inwieweit die Initiative in der Lage ist, die ihr zur Verfügung stehenden regionalen Ressourcen effizient einzusetzen. Daneben ist aber auch das Vorhandensein gewisser soziologischer Faktoren in einer solchen Initiative, innerhalb und außerhalb der Gruppe, ein wichtiges Erfolgskriterium.

Schlagnote: Gemeinschaftliche Vermarktung, Biologischer Landbau, Erfolgsfaktoren

Summary

The aim of this paper is to give an insight into some crucial aspects of the success of regionally acting organic farmer initiatives and show the complexity of developing an adequate marketing strategy. Therefore the paper is mainly focusing the internal management and organisation, the marketing and the social cohesion of an OMI. Although this paper does not provide a "common recipe for the successful development" of an organic marketing initiative, it tries to illustrate its peculi-

arities and special aspects in comparison to conventional ways of marketing agricultural produce.

Keywords: cooperative marketing, organic agriculture, success factors

1. Introduction

One of the key issues of this paper will be to provide a framework for the identification of success relevant aspects of a regional acting Organic Marketing Initiative (OMI). Therefore the focus is mainly laid on the regional environment and its efficient use through the OMI. Besides the contemplation of the market potential, either inside the region or outside, this paper also tries to envisage the organisational and networking aspects of an OMI and its influence on its development. Although there already exists quite a mentionable number of literature concerning the successful development of farmers initiatives and marketing strategy development, there still is a lack of knowledge regarding the main bottlenecks during the establishment of an OMI as well as related to the peculiarities in marketing regional and organic produce. In a broad approach the analysis aims to explain the special and often more traditional than market-orientated behaviour of farmers society and the consequences this has for the successful initiating and leading of an OMI.

The results of this study are based on an investigation of 12 OMIs, which was conducted in three regions in Austria (Vorarlberg/Mühlviertel/Marchfeld) in 2001. The assessment was part of the EU-funded research project "Organic marketing initiatives and rural development" (OMIaRD; QLK5-2000-01124).

2. Definitions

2.1 Organic Marketing Initiative (OMI)

As proposed in the definition of the OMIaRD project an OMI is "*an organisation of actors (privately or cooperatively owned) involving participation of organic producers which aims to improve the strategic marketing position of the products by adding value to the raw product through processing or marketing.*" (OMIaRD, 2001). Therefore an OMI is characterized by the three main aspects, namely its dealing with organic produce, the active

involvement of farmers in the OMI and the marketing of organic produce. Although, per definition, the marketing of regional organic produce is not explicitly an pre-condition for being classified an OMI, this study is based on regional initiatives. This can be explained by the fact, that organic production in general already claims for regional closed circuits of food supply chains, including either production or distribution area. (Woodward et al., 1996)

2.2 Region

The concept of a region is a very broad and distensible term. Therefore the definition of a region seems to be mostly in the eye of the beholder. Regions can be determined as sub-national (e.g. Mühlviertel), transnational (e.g. Region around Lake Constance) or even supra-national (e.g. Balkan region, Middle East)(Kratochvil et al., 2001). The geographical determination of regions seems to be the easiest way for restriction, but in this case the problem seems to be the negation of all kinds of social aspects, like tradition, social skills or cultural identity within the residents. Concerning social and cultural containment of an area Häring (1991) proposes the following criteria for outlining a region: *“A Region is a manageable and common inhabited area, with common problems and a common interest in solving this problems under commitment of its natural, institutional, economic and human resources”*(translation of the author). Thus the use of region outlined in this paper represents a mix of social and cultural similarities within a community, which is geographically bordered to already well known and established areas.

3. Methodology

The investigation of the OMIs was divided mainly into two steps. First of all a general coverage of already existing OMIs all over Austria was done by sending out an initial questionnaire to gather some basic information on the number of OMIs in Austria, their size, organisation form, main product groups and distribution channels. Due to defined selection criteria (e.g. turnover) in a second step it was attempted to cluster the investigated OMIs into regions. Finally 3 regions in Austria were selected (Vorarlberg, Mühlviertel and Marchfeld) with 4 initiatives each.

The following investigation of the 4 selected OMIs followed the principles of the case study approach. Via personal interviews using semi-structured questionnaires with the main actors in the OMI it was tried to get a more detailed insight in the OMI and its network relations. Due to the fact that besides internal success factor of the OMIs an important role of the research project was given to regional development issues, additionally in every region experts were investigated to get a deeper and clearer inside in the regional network relationships. The survey additional included literature on economic, social and organic topics in the region to complete the demands of the analysis.

4. The analytical framework

This section of the paper aims to illustrate the main criteria for the analysis and explain its potential influence on the success or failure of an OMI. As mentioned in the introduction one of the main question of this paper is to demonstrate factors of success with a special focus on their embedding in a regional context. Therefore the framework intends to identify external influence factors in the regional surrounding, and establish interlinks to the success or failure of the initiative. The emphasis of different factors due to the own characteristics of each region differs from case to case.

First of all a crucial determinant for a region is its geographical extension including the aspects of soil conditions and climate. Although the paper deals with OMIs, per definition farmers themselves play an important role either in production, processing or marketing. Therefore one aspect of the analytical framework is concentrating on the possibilities of agricultural production within the region. The reason for estimating prime production a substantial influence factor is the mainly two-sided: First of all farmers in general apply a traditional behaviour and see their purpose much more in increasing net production than in maximising gross profit (VOGEL et al., 2003). Net production therefore seems to be crucial aspect of farmers identity and social respect within the farming community. Secondly consumers expectations in the traceability of origin and the image of regional products inevitably correspond with the necessity for the OMI at least partly to deal with produce out of the region.

The next issue to catch an eye on is the economic surrounding of the OMI. It seems to be quite important for OMIs, through which economic activities the region is characterized, especially concerning the potential for marketing products regional or even local as well as regarding to the structure of regional economy. Besides marketing also the infrastructure for potential cooperation partners (e.g. in processing or packaging) are increasing the OMIs potential for successful development. For the OMI it is e.g. more likely to cooperate with restaurants or hotels within a tourist area (agro-tourism) than e.g. in rural and depopulated areas (although even there are some possibilities for business development). Especially for organic produce, which due to production costs is more expensive than "conventional" mass products, purchasing power in the region seems to be crucial element for orientation of the whole strategy of the OMI.

Another important aspect included in the analysis is the institutional environment of the OMI. Due to the fact, that most of the investigated initiatives are quite small, economically spoken they are not able to compete with conventional structures on the level of economies of scale. Therefore it seems to be necessary for OMIs to have the possibility to resort to regional institutional structures either concerning economic support or offering technical advice. In our case two main types of institutions contributing to the success (or even failure) of initiatives were identified, namely rural development institutions and organic farmer associations. The involvement of external advice, mainly for business plan development, financial calculations, tax consultancy, but also for product innovation as well as for marketing concerns, seems to be substantial and absolutely necessary in the planning and starting phase of an OMI. The contacts arisen out of this co-operation later on can be very useful for solving unexpected or urgent problems in the initiative.

Integrating the last two aspects of the framework, the political environment seems to be quite relevant for the successful development of an OMI. Regarding to our analysis political environment is an important factor either for regional economy or institutional environment. A strong effort of policy towards strengthening the position of less favoured areas either by offering financial support or by encouraging necessary institutional structures (regional or organic) within the region, enormously increases the potential for the successful develop-

ment of OMIs. Besides the political focus on endogenous regional development issues one possibility to open new perspectives for OMIs can be done by effective legislation. In the case of e.g. in Vienna the municipality decided, that by 2005 all public canteens, especially in hospitals, old people's homes and schools, should use at least 30 % of organic produce. Additionally the resolution also aims to increase the organic husbanded area in Vienna up to 30 % until 2005. Through these decisions new perspectives were opened for the establishment of new distribution channels for OMIs.

Last but not least one important aspect of a successful initiative is still missing, namely the social aspect of all the actors involved. The contribution of regional inhabitants to the success of an OMI is also related to their social capital which inevitably corresponds with the ability for innovative and networking processes (Putnam, 1993). Innovation is considered as one of the most important factors for a sustainable development of businesses in general, which seems also to apply to OMIs. The basis of innovative development is seen in adequate communication and cooperation of actors, which leads us to the next point, namely the networking. Co-operational work and communication during the analysis emerged quite important for the establishment as well as for the further development of the OMI.

Concluding the content of our analytical framework it tries to explain the characteristics of a region and its special peculiarities in an holistic approach, beginning with geographical conditions as the bases for agricultural production. The natural potential for agricultural production is one of the main restrictions for OMIs and has to taken into consideration for the whole strategy. Followed by potentials of regional economy, institutional environment and political support the OMI has to analyse its possibilities concerning the further strategic planning. Above all potentials and restrictions in the surrounding one of the most important issues is grounded in the social activities of the OMI, namely to mobilize important actors either within the initiative or in its environment to actively participate.

5. Success factors of OMIs –developing a strategy

After focusing on external influence factors on the success of an OMI, the following part aims to illustrate relevant considerations from be-

ginning of an OMI until its establishment, always taking into account the potentials offered by the regional environment. Although it is quite unlikely to cover all crucial aspects in the development of an OMI, this section tries to point out some important stumbling blocks and possible ways for OMIs to cope with it.

For easing the description of results, the analysis was divided into 3 parts defined by organisation and management, marketing and regional networking. Although networking covers quite a huge range of activities, there will be provided some examples, so to speak as successful "show-cases". For the whole analysis there always has to be kept in mind, all the success factors have to be seen with a focus on regional and organic product marketing.

5.1 Organisation and Management

- The pre-starting phase

The involvement of farmers into self-managed businesses has always been a very fussy and sensitive issue. Due to long lasting traditions and habits and sometimes because of a more "conservative" approach to current problems farmers' society has its own characteristic. Before establishing an OMI the first thing to do is to catch the farmers' interest for new ideas, which often seems to be quite difficult (OMIARD, 2001). Therefore one main point in establishing a successful OMI is to convince farmers, that there are alternative ways of production and marketing agricultural goods than competing on economies of scale. In this phase crucial points are to establish and communicate common values within the group, which seems to be the base for strong solidarity. Additionally it must be secured that all potential members get an "easy" access to join the community, which means, at the beginning there should be no "insuperable" obstacles (social, cultural or economic) to the members (Assouline et. al, 2000). Only by the acceptance of new concepts through the farmers themselves and the belief in its functioning, the motivation for active participation in the initiative can be guaranteed. The whole pre-establishing phase of an OMI can be characterized by adequate communication within the members, accompanied by a steady learning process, and finally resulting in a concrete and common accepted vision for the establishment of an OMI. In most of the cases there seems to be a more or less "charismatic" leader or leader group, which tries to interest and involve other actors for their ideas

and visions. How and by which means other actors get involved differs from case to case, so it would be a lie to propose a common method. But it could be assessed, that a high social position within the farmers' community seems to ease the awakening of interest anyway.

Especially concerning organic agriculture the threat of being unsuccessful could be observed in most of the investigated cases. In the case of Biobauern Sulzberg, a dairy cooperative near Bregenz/Vorarlberg organic farming in general had a very bad image. Conventional farming community perceived organic farming as untidy and political greenish or leftist, which was a main barrier for converting to organic farming. In this case the establishment of the OMI only succeeded through the permanent information and clarification campaign of the driving actors.

- The starting phase

In the founding phase of the initiative the original vision and idea of the members should be completed by a concrete and realistic strategy for further development. Therefore the some kind of SWOT analysis should have been conducted and discussed within the group including a rough estimation of the market potential for the offered products. The necessity of agreeing up on a common goal and strategy for the further development of the OMI is a basic requirement for a successful proceeding in the future. At this stage of development the key issue seems to be the cohesion among the members, because from now on responsibility for decisions or e.g. investments has to be carried out by all members. The main problem identified within the investigated OMIs was not the development of a concrete and realistic vision at all, but rather its implementation. The set-up of marketing relations e.g. is mostly something really new for farmers, which sometimes leads to unexpected problems in marketing their produce. Additionally cost calculations, especially when they rely to much on public support, seem to have a negative impact on the economic sustainability of the OMI. The input of public support should be very well elaborated and future-orientated. To secure the active involvement and decision making power of all members the next important step will be the selection of the right organisation form. As shown in the table of investigated OMIs there is quite a broad range of legal possibilities for founding an OMI. The "Bergkräutergenossenschaft" for example, an organic herb produc-

ing co-operative in Mühlviertel/upper Austria, at the beginning was run by the board with the support of the plenary meetings of all members. Although the cooperative fulfilled the integration of all members, due to its size, important decisions of the daily business were executed much too inflexible. Besides the workload for board members, organising the OMI in addition to the daily work on their farms seemed to enforce this effect additionally. Therefore it was decided to source out marketing activities to an “external” management, which from today’s perspective safeguarded the survival of the OMI. Outsourcing of management had two positive effects: The manager, a specialist in marketing, has the possibility to react more flexible on the requirements of daily business, while farmers could more or less concentrate on prime production and processing. Although the management was outsourced, the OMI still remained a cooperative, where major decisions like investments are carried out by all members, which is an important factor of motivation within the community.

Concluding, whatever legal form for the OMI is selected, it must be secured, that members have the possibility to actively participate in the decision making process as well as that to a certain extend the flexibility of the OMI is sufficient for daily business decisions.

- The established phase

Due to various reasons it could be observed that in some of the investigated OMIs motivation and cohesion within the initiative was decreasing over the time. In the pre-starting and starting phase of the OMI motivation of members is increased by their enthusiasm for their new idea, the necessity to bring in voluntary work to get the business running or even by the common depth for investments. In the established phase one danger seems to be the increasing routine within the OMI, which by the way leads to an decrease of motivation. Besides in some OMIs the initial strategic goal or vision is already achieved, so therefore also the motivation for further active participation is decreasing rapidly. To maintain motivation within the members there are several points to be considered. Besides the social acceptance of the project within the community, which especially for farmers appeared as an important factor, some “success experiences” in reaching their goals, even when sometimes they are quite small, seem to be necessary for maintaining motivation. Although a “successful experience” implies

previous success, it can be assumed that it deeply contributes to the overall motivation and therefore to the success of an OMI (FROMM et al., 2000). Additionally it seems to be necessary to provide the possibility for permanent communication within the members, which is the cornerstone for an innovative further proceeding. Only through innovative ideas new strategies for the OMI can be redefined and embarked on.

5.2 The marketing strategy

Marketing of regional organic produce in many aspects completely differs from marketing through conventional distribution channels. The main differences can be characterised by its regional origin as well as its organic production. Around these two features the OMI has to develop its whole marketing strategy.

A basic requirement for developing a successful marketing strategy was seen in a well-elaborated preparation phase. Besides the organisational and social aspects of the pre-starting phase of the OMI at the beginning there should be a rough estimation about the market conditions, which gives a first insight in the market potential. Due to the fact, that most of the investigated OMIs are situated in more or less rural areas, the purchasing power and the buying habits of the regional population play an important role in developing an adequate strategy. Especially in this respect it was seen, that farmers in general tend to overestimate the actual potential of their own products in the region itself. It could be asserted, that, especially in rural areas, consumers tend more to buy regional products than organic regional products due to the fact that the difference of regional top quality products and organic produce seems not to vindicate the price difference. Therefore most of the investigated OMIs concentrated their business more or less on urban areas and its nearby surrounding, where the difference between regional and organic seems to be more appreciated.

The acceptance of the organic produce by the consumers leads us to an other important aspect of a successful marketing strategy, namely the definition of the mission statement of the OMI and its products. In this respect it was seen as absolutely necessary, that farmers develop and accept a precise concept of what their product is standing for. This mission-statement-definition was seen bilateral in its functioning: Concerning the marketing strategy it turned out to be important to represent a

common identity to potential costumers or trade partners. Only thus it can be secured, that the communication strategy, which especially dealing with “additional values” of products is indispensable, can be developed and carried out in the right way. Secondly a starched common identity seems be essential within group of members themselves. This “inner band” of solidarity and common responsibility is a very important pillar for the smooth running of the OMI.

Internal and external represented common identity of the OMI leads us to next point of consideration, the communication strategy. As mentioned before the marketing of regional organic produce in some aspects differs completely form marketing in conventional ways. The main difference is the adding of regional characteristics to the product, so to say to communicate an “regional image” through the product. Therefore it appears very important to either create or rely on a positive image of the region, well known for its environmental friendly production methods, landscape or recreation area. Nearly all of the investigated OMIs tried to use the image of the region for communicating some “additional value” of the product to their consumers or trade partners, which gives them a status of less exchangeability in competition to other actors. It was found out, that OMIs, situated in regions with a strong and well known positive image, are more successful in adding value to their products than others. Especially in the Marchfeld region, which commonly is considered to be a very intensive vegetable and corn producing area, it seemed to be very difficult for OMIs to create a positive image of their products. In this cases the other strategy was pursued, namely to put the organic production in the forefront of the communication strategy.

The two main issues an OMI has to take care of in its marketing strategy is its regional image and its organic production. Where possible and reasonable, both aspects can be communicated in combination, but, although regional and organic produced, in some case a negative regional aspect hinders the successful development of a strategy. But also with a positive regional image it has to be considered that conventional labels or products as well can use the image of region for their marketing strategy, which for organic produce, was seen as a substantial disadvantage.

Another point, which has to be taken into consideration, is the distribution policy of an OMI. In general it differs not really from conventional

ways of direct marketing, with all its problems in logistics and product quality. In this respect it could be found out, that the more diversified distributions channels are disposed, the more crisis security was expected.

Concluding the characteristic of a region, either positive or negative, seems to have a substantial impact on the communication strategy as well as the target markets.

5.3 The networking

Due to the small size of the OMIs it seems to be quite reasonable to make some considerations about the cooperation and network strategy. When we talk about networks in general we can divide them into two types, namely horizontal and vertical networking. Vertical networks are orientated along the supply chain including actors like the producer, the processor, the retailer or the wholesalers whereas horizontal networks aim to connect actors not directly involved in the production or marketing (Murdoch, 2000).

Vertical networks in general give the possibility to the OMI to out-source some of their activities to more professional actors in the food supply chain. Due to the fact that OMIs consist out of farmers, their main experience and expertise is focusing mainly on production and not implicitly on processing or marketing their produce. Therefore it seems quite important for the OMI to find proper cooperation partners, which one on hand do not cause a strong dependency relationship and on the other hand fit into the whole marketing and communication strategy of the OMI. Concerning the recent development of the organic food market in Austria most of the organic produce is marketed via big retailer chains, which therefore created their own brands and labels. Although, regarding logistics and management, for OMIs it seems to be quite comfortable and useful, marketing via retailer chains has its own peculiarities and risks. Firstly one main attribute of the product, namely its regionalism and regional origin, is getting lost through the branding policy of big retail chains. Thereby the OMI is not only losing its big potential for marketing something special and unique but also its exchangeability in comparison to other suppliers. In principle this way of cooperation seems to weaken the position and market power of an OMI, which is absolutely contrary to its founding idea, namely to escape the dependency and influence of a globalized food

supply chain with all its negative consequences for the producers. Successful and sustainable co-operations between OMIs and retailer chains from the OMIs point of view must be based on an adequate communication and branding strategy, which in our case means that the regional aspect is put in the forefront of the marketing policy. Due to the enormous increased choice for purchaser to buy organic produce all over Europe, it seems to be the only way to secure the initial idea of founding an OMI, in fact to reallocate power within the supply chain back to the producer, to give farmers the possibility to act as “price-makers” more than as “price takers”.

A second aspect, which has to be considered when talking about cooperation partners, is the image or the marketing policy of the partner itself. Concerning the expectations and requirements of organic consumers trust and tractability are considered to be the main pillars for buying organic produce. Therefore it seems to be absolutely necessary for OMIs to question the “general” or “public” image of its partners to secure that it fits into the pursuit marketing strategy. For a cooperation of an OMI with a big slaughterhouse for example, one on hand it has to be guaranteed that mix-up with conventional produce is nearly impossible, on the other hand “slaughtering practices” must somehow please organic consumers expectations.

The term horizontal network covers all aspects of cooperation, which are outside the supply chain. Therefore the main aim seems to somehow embed or integrate the OMI into its regional surrounding and therefore play an important role for the rooting of the OMI in the region. In our investigation mainly two aspects were taken into consideration, namely regional development and organic farmers associations. The question for the OMI to be answered is, which potential do these organisations offer and how can our strategy be integrated in their network. Concerning organic farmers associations it was found out, that their main skills and potentials are in providing advice, especially regarding production methods. Additionally farmers associations also are active promoters of marketing possibilities, which in some cases opens new perspectives and distribution channels for the OMI. Besides advice organic farmers associations are quite important for creating “organic farmers community”, which seems on one hand to strengthen the cohesion among the members of the OMI, on the other hand it of-

fers a possibility to build “bridges” and networks within the whole organic farming society.

Apart from that an OMI orientating its whole strategy on regionalism has to take care about its regional rootage. Especially in Austria in most of the rural areas the development of endogenous regional development strategies has a long tradition, which offers an enormous potential for OMIs to participate in various activities. First of all due to various programs on national and European level regional development agencies are considered a main contact for achieving financial support for necessary investments. Especially in the starting phase of an OMI financial support was mentioned as an important reason for farmers to participate in various programs. Additionally regional development agencies offer organisational support in developing new market channels. In the case of Biobauern Sulzberg e.g., the regional development agency (RDA) is actively involved in the marketing of agricultural goods through cooperation with tourism or establishing relationships to potential export marketers. In general it appeared that RDAs act as important contact persons for coordinating different needs and expectations of various sectors within in the region, mainly focusing on agriculture, trade and tourism.

Concluding networking, either horizontal or vertical, seems to be a crucial aspect for the success or failure of an OMI. Only through adequate, which in this case means adapted to the overall strategy of the OMI, networking relationships farmers get a possibility for a sustainable development of their OMI and keeping the market power in their hand.

6. Conclusions

As the previous chapters show the successful founding and leading of an OMI is dependent on various factors, some of which can, other which cannot be influenced. To really get into detail with all relevant aspects would go beyond the scope of this paper. Regarding a sustainable and successful development of an OMI mainly three questions have to be taken into consideration. How to get farmers involved, how to realise the proposed vision and finally how to keep the business running for a longer period.

The involvement of farmers in conjointly led initiatives has always been a fussy undertaking. Although the recent progress in globalizing

agricultural production as well as the processing or marketing inevitably shows negative impacts on agricultural income and practices, in general farmers tend to cope with all these changes at the farm level. Only in some cases, the common disaffection with the overall situation, either due to economic or ideological reasons, for farmers is seen as a common base for further cooperation. Therefore the proposed vision for founding an OMI has to provide realistic and understandable alternatives to the recent farmers' situation to firstly raise their interest, which is finally resulting in active participation. In the analysis it was seen essential, that a "charismatic leader" or "leader group" is actively promoting their vision or idea, often with enormous personal input, to finally convince (other) farmers to participate. Therefore a basic requirement was identified in a common accepted vision, supported by the groups' solidarity and active participation.

The transformation of the idea into practice is mainly dominated by three aspects, namely the technical, marketing and the social skills of the group members. Whereas the technical skills require the knowledge and ability in production and processing, the marketing strategy has to be developed in strong relationship with the regional surrounding and its potentials. Social skills mainly allude to the internal management of the OMI, securing the active decision making process for members as a crucial part of their motivation. Besides the ability to establish useful networks, however described, and its efficient use through the OMI were identified as a main possibility to strengthen its position competing with global players. Although the concept of regional marketing is not a magic bullet for the maintenance of farming in less favoured areas, the building of alliances inevitably strengthens the position not only of agriculture, but also of the region itself. Therefore the common and, in my opinion, quite bleak thinking of "how to minimize the negative impacts of globalised food chain" should be replaced by "how to strengthen the position of the people concerned". Although, sometimes forgotten, the initial concept of organic agriculture is in straight-line with all these considerations.

Last but not least an established OMI has to make sure, that innovative processes build the basics for further development. Continuous learning and innovative processes within the OMI besides economic development foster the motivation within the members for further participation. Additionally the permanent evaluation of goals and needs and

their common adjustment within the OMI seem to one important factor for its surviving for a longer period.

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Affiliation

*Dipl.Ing. Norbert Gleirscher
Centre for Mountain Agriculture
University of Innsbruck
Technikerstrasse 13
6020 Innsbruck
Tel.: +43 512/507 5694
eMail: norbert.gleirscher@uibk.ac.at*