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WP5: Task 4 Report – Communication

How is the communication of values, qualities, and motivations supported along the value chain from producer to consumer and vice versa?

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

1.	Introduction	3
2.	Terminology	4
3.	Theoretical Background.....	6
4.	Methodology	9
5.	General Findings	10
5.1.	General observations over all cases.....	10
5.2.	Formalized communication (inside the business and along the supply chain):	14
5.3.	Standard consumer information.....	16
5.4.	Standard consumer feedback	17
6.	Specific findings	21
6.1	Informal meeting spaces:	21
6.2	Food ambassadors:	25
6.3	Social Media use:	28
7.	Discussion	31
8.	Conclusions & Recommendations	34
8.1	Conclusions based on the general findings:	34
8.2	Recommendations for stakeholders:	34
8.3	Recommendations for policy:	35
	References.....	37
	Annex	38



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1. Introduction

First, we consider it helpful to give a short introduction into the topic of communication and share some reflections why this aspect is important to look at in the frame of the HealthyGrowth project. The general question is why communication is necessary and what the purpose of communication is. One aspect commonly mentioned concerns information as a means of marketing. As Karstberg (2015) notes: *"Research shows that a significant barrier to consumers purchasing more organic foods is lack of information. This leads the relevant body of research to call for better communication around organic foods."* Zanoli and Naspetti (2002:652) expressed the need *"to devise a better communication strategy"* with a view to *"informing consumers about the extra quality inherent in organic food"* (Duffy et al. 2005:374). And Aertsens et al. (2011) add that consequently, *"consumers' lack of knowledge concerning organic food is an important factor slowing down growth"*. So communication is of utmost importance when it comes to aspects of growth of the organic sector.

However, ultimately communication is the basis of every human interaction. It is the process by which we create sense and meaning and built up relationships with each other. Communication is thus to be understood in its broadest sense, so that actually everything that carries meaning or conveys a message is to be understood as communication. It therefore comprises all forms of audio-visual interactions between people (face-to-face conversations, phone calls, skype/web-meetings etc.) as well as artefacts like receipts, contracts, e-mails, all forms of publication materials (e.g. brochures, leaflets, flyers, radio or TV commercials, video clips, newspaper ads etc.) and – not to forget – of course also the (organic) products themselves. This said the next point in question is what the purpose of communication is specifically within values based organic food chains. Regarding the overall objective the HealthyGrowth project, we are primarily interested to investigate the role of communication for maintaining trust and integrity during growth processes. In this respect, communication becomes particularly important for collectively developing desired qualities, discussing which values to communicate, establishing fairness, loyalty, identification and trust or simply negotiating volumes and prizes. Moreover, it plays also a crucial role for increasing the knowledge of stakeholders involved along the supply chain.

The starting point for Task 4 is a reflection on the basic differences of communicating within direct marketing channels versus indirect marketing channels. Because of the mundane yet highly consequential fact that in the industrialized part of the world, *"producers and consumers no longer know each other"* (Bellows et al. 2008:23), strategic communication is crucial to raise awareness of and to inform about the intrinsic and extrinsic values of food products (Bodini et al. 2009). One core element in direct marketing is the feedback of consumers to primary producers that fosters identification with the product and motivates them to maintain and improve on quality, which is associated to values. A second feature is consumer trust, credibility, authenticity and loyalty. This is strongly connected with knowledge about processes of production and processing. Here, often already the *potentiality* of personal direct contact seems to be sufficient. The current standard efforts of traceability and proof through certification systems are, in our opinion, not able to substitute this. Furthermore, according to the concept of Mid-Scale Values Based Food Chains, values are not only attached to products, but also embedded in the relationship of partners along the chain. These virtues are strengthened via face-to-face communication processes.



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According to the Task 4 descriptions, developed in the case-study reports, the most interesting, outstanding, overarching and at the same time also most crucial question comprising various aspects of communication is:

How can a strong identification of farmers and consumers with the value chain and its products be established, fostered and thus finally maintained during growth processes?

Thus, our main hypothesis is that Mid-Scale Values Based Food Chains need to find ways of substituting the direct contact between producer and consumer in order to transmit the core values. A successful and consistent transmission of core values along the chain will help to foster the identification of the primary producer with the final product and maintain trust and loyalty of consumers. This entails also the establishment of effective feedback loops.

2. Terminology

We divide communication roughly into two distinct forms. The first one is addressing the routine communication along the chain between partners as well as on an internal level. This form of communication is typically characterized by regular e-mail and phone communication regarding negotiations on prices and volumes, agreements on delivery and logistics and are usually furthermore complemented by occasional personal meetings for important points and delicate topics to discuss. We subsume all these practices of communication under the term '**formalized communication**'.

The second one comprises communications, which happen more randomly, spontaneous and casual. They are characterized by free, open and easy interpersonal interaction that is possible to emerge for instance at farm festivals, employee activities, fairs, tastings or demos in the retail store. This is what we understand by '**informal communication**'. Such forms of informal communication can occur on a horizontal (between groups of farmers or processors etc.) or vertical (including different groups of stakeholders of the value chain) and on an internal as well as on an external level.

A further decisive characteristic in contrast to formal communication is that it actually does not always need an interaction, often it is enough to provide areas where the potentiality for communication is given. Hence, informal communication focuses on spaces or arenas where interactions *can* occur. Such '**informal meeting spaces**' can be attached to and occur in the frame of formalized communication formats (i.e.: seminars, workshops, presentations, congresses).

Furthermore, a more or less innovative way of communicating values and building up relationships of trust that some cases apply is social media. '**Social media**' are computer-mediated tools that allow people to create, share or exchange information, ideas, and pictures/videos in virtual communities and networks. Social media are defined as "*a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content*" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Concerning the use of web-based communication we particularly look at participatory forms of social media like Facebook which are intentionally designed to enable a two-way communication. Although also Twitter, Instagram, Blogs on web-pages or YouTube etc. allow the user to respond or comment to such user-generated content and could thus be interesting to look at, these forms got comparably less exploited by the investigated case studies and are therefore only referred to exemplarily as further possibilities. Furthermore, it is important to make a distinction



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between '**participatory social media**' and '**web-based communication**' in general, as this covers basically any form of communication which is provided via internet (e.g. the use of QR codes to get more information to consumers, internal electronic newsletters to producers, homepages, use of doodle to share tasks etc.).

Finally, we considered intermediaries in the communication between producers and consumers who provide personal contact, which we call here 'Food Ambassadors', as another form to substitute the direct contact between producers and consumers. '**Food Ambassadors**' are human actors which are bridging (mediating) between different worlds, most notably the 'world of producers' and the 'world of consumers'. This form of interaction (food ambassadorship¹) becomes especially important for enterprises which are based on values of significant complexity, as in the case of organic food networks, incorporating a wide array of values (notions like regionality, seasonality, organic, local, fresh, transparency, trust, credibility, ethical etc.). Hence, ambassadors take the role of representatives and interact with other stakeholders (primarily in the frame of informal, but sometimes also formal communication spaces). This covers for instance producers working as representatives of the primary production towards consumers at fairs, events and marketing occasions in supermarkets, but also cooking chefs, employees or selected consumers and consumer groups who are taught to act as multipliers/conveyors and thus are targeted specifically.²

A food ambassador is successful when he or she is able to transmit values in a way the recipient/addressee can identify with. This means that [1] it is crucial for the recipient that the communication is highly contingent with the context within which the communication takes place and [2] that the food ambassador as the sender or conveyor of a message manages to build up coherence between the two different 'worlds' of the producer and the consumer. Food ambassadors that have knowledge and competence, that can be held accountable and who can at least create the impression of objectivity may achieve this.

Two further clarifications concern on the one hand why and where we see a **difference between mere marketing and value communication** and on the other hand what we mean with **formalization or professionalization of communication** processes.

First, the purpose of communication differs. Marketing is a form of communication that places economic considerations in front, whereas value communication has aspirations or motives that go further. Of course, as these values are attached to a product, an inherent economic interest is always present. Nevertheless, the values attached to it go way beyond. If communicated successfully, the product may then also be able to mediate that it represents a different form of agriculture, an environmental and animal friendly production, a more respectful form of trade between partners or even a completely different and system changing worldview. In the frame of this paper we focus mainly on value communication.

¹The mechanism of 'ambassadorship' is well known from other fields, such as various forms of cultural capitalism, including experience economy. What characterizes food ambassadors is that the process of communication in which they are involved in, conveys values which go beyond mere functionality or convenience, but seek to deploy a wider range of appreciations, such as brand loyalty, commitment, engagement, reciprocity, or ,experiential learning. Regarding the latter, it might be useful to distinguish between communication resulting in 'adventure' versus 'experience', or perhaps between hedonism and transformational learning.

²Such ambassadors are not to be confused with testimonials used for common marketing activities (like for instance sport stars, VIPs etc.) who promote products in commercials or so.



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Second, we want to explain what is meant by **professionalization** or **formalization** of communication. As we could observe in most cases, over time the communication becomes more routinized. People know when to talk to whom via which channel. For instance, people know when to place the orders, who prefers e-mail conversation and who needs to get a follow-up call. This means that people can empathize with one another to a certain extent and understand mutual time and structural bindings. In such cases, it is more about *how* information gets forwarded and not only that it is transmitted at all.

Professionalization or formalization thus not only means that a lot of initial red tape can continuously be cut and that everyday communication becomes more time-effective, or to phrase it communication theory wise, that the noise which is distorting a successful mediation from a sender to an addressee is constantly getting less. It also refers to a mutual understanding and the mental ability to put oneself into someone else's shoes and understand also his/her situation (i.e. time-bindings) or viewpoint.

3. Theoretical Background

Communication is at the heart of meaning-making activities not only in marketing, but also in a wide range of political, social, economic, and psychological arenas. It serves as a way to develop, organize, and disseminate knowledge. In fact, society is a sum of relationships, which share some kind of information. In order to understand human communication, we must understand how people relate to one another. In other words, without communication, relationships are impossible. In this respect, direct marketing has basically four main advantages in the interaction between producer and consumer:

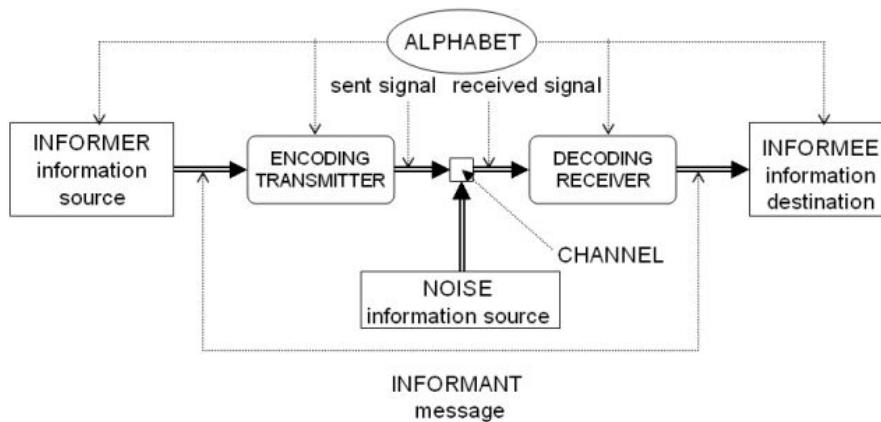
- a) The producer can inform the consumer about the intrinsic qualities of the product,
- b) The consumer can request the producer to produce according to his/her expectations and provide positive and/or negative feedback,
- c) The direct feedback by the consumer increases the motivation of farmers and fosters the identification with the product,
- d) Producer identification corresponds with trust on the side of the consumers. Hence, consumer trust is higher in direct marketing (see e.g. Villiger, 2000; Hasan, 2010).

In indirect marketing chains, consistent communication has somehow to substitute these advantages. As our findings have shown, particularly social and web-2.0 media, possibilities of informal interactions and food ambassadors working as multipliers display the most promising tools to do so.

The classic communication model according to Shannon/Weaver (1949) with its extension including also en-coding and de-coding (see graphic 1 below), distinguishes the following basic components:



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Graphic 1: Communication Model [adapted from Shannon and Weaver (1949)] <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/information-semantic/>

- Communication can be described as a relation or a process between at least two communicators, a sender and a receiver/recipient
- There are at least two communicative acts, a message or information uttered by the sender, and a reception of this message or information on the side of the recipient.
- Sender and recipient must have an adequate & sufficient repertoire of common signs and symbols available which overlap in their meaning.
- A channel marks the physical/tangible/material conveyor/carrier of the communication.

The model has to be adapted and extended in various ways though. Primarily this model understands communicative processes rather linear and disregards circular, mutual and recursive considerations. Still, as a study by Duffy et al. (2005:23) shows, in fact “*the majority of [organic] organisations*” rely on linear mass media “*to communicate their campaign messages as it provides the opportunity to reach millions of people at minimal cost.*” These forms of communication are however primarily sender-oriented and are a typical expression of the linear communication model according to Shanon and Weaver (1949) for whom communication is primarily a matter of sending out messages while trying to avoid ‘noise’.

Kastberg (2015:2) opposes this point of view: “*Strictly speaking, it is not of primary interest what the receiver may retain from the communication activity, because within the horizon of this ideology, it goes without saying that the receivers retain what is transmitted. From the point of view of more recent communication theory it is, however, well known that even if all viewers or listeners are offered the same kind of information, in the same way, this does not imply that they retain the same information, or if they retain at all. [...] There is, however, no algorithm for human understanding based on a simple input-output logic, and, more specifically, no evidence to support a causal relationship between communicated output and retention in receivers. That is also why the idea of gauging the effectiveness of organic (mass) communication [...] will not render applicable insights, as it provides no feedback on the acceptance/understanding of the message(s) communicated or any impacts, direct or indirect, on purchasing/consumption behavior, attitudes and perceptions*”. In terms of communication theory, we may thus conclude that although linear transmission may be necessary, it is not sufficient.



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Therefore, there are generally two modifications to this linear communication model. On the one hand, terms like redundancy and variety are introduced and on the other hand, communicative circles and feedback loops are included. The first addresses the circumstance that sometimes, more information or several messages have to be sent in order to trigger understanding and that furthermore the context in which the communication takes place has to be considered. The second modification points out, that the recipient of information also has to give feedback in one or the other way, showing that the message or information has reached him.

So, with respect to our objective, particularly Watzlawick's theory of feedback (1967) respectively the concept of 'interactional communication' Kastberg (2015) are two interesting aspects to look at. As we assume that receiving feedback is a crucial point for farmers to identify with a product in indirect marketing, we hereby want to give some more explanations regarding these theories and apply them to our research focus. Concerning the theory of feedback it would be important that the „*speaker observes his own communicative acting, his distinctive production of signs/tokens and evaluates what impact it has on the recipient. That's where feedback can emerge. Through that, he becomes himself a recipient of his own information and can correct or influence the subsequent information again*“ (Schützeichel 2004:28). This feedback can be either positive (thus supporting or strengthening an information) or negative (thus mitigating or relativizing it). Basically, this theory emphasizes that communication is an exchange between a sender and a recipient of information in which both influence and affect each other.

In a similar vein Kastberg (2015) argues that one crucial problem of the organic food sector is that communication activities are often monologuous (e.g. formal lectures, speeches etc.) and linear (printed publicity materials like leaflets, brochures, commercials etc.). The flow of information is from a sender to a receiver, like typical mass communication aimed at informing a public. In such linear communication transmission, we have no possibilities to measure how much of the information has reached our addressees and whether they have understood it correctly, although this would actually be of great importance to the sender as Dewey (1933) “*the deposit is what counts*”. That's why informal meeting spaces are so important, where an interactive, or how Kastberg would call it, 'interactional' communication may occur. “*Instances of (such)organic food communication activities as interaction would entail some kind of feedback loops, dialogical question-answer sequences at a symposium on organics for instance, whereas instances of organic food communication activities as coaction would be cooperative endeavours, e.g., upstream engagement when it comes to developing and implementing organic policies*” (Kastberg, 2015).

Examples for such communication formats which enable more interactive processes are informal meeting spaces like fairs, farm festivals, excursions, seminars etc.. “*Being interactive, this format of communication does not, in fact cannot, take place merely because a sender has sent, so to speak, but occurs once a receiver has, in one way or the other, interacted with a sender. [...] Not only is the audience encouraged to interact, but it is critical to both process and product that they do so*” (Kastberg, 2015). Hence, we can keep in mind that the communication format chosen critically influences the impact of any form of organic communication.



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4. Methodology

In accordance with our analytical focus of our hypothesis outlined above, we analyzed modes of communicating values between producers, consumers and diverse intermediaries for each case. This included quantitative and qualitative mapping of upstream and downstream communication patterns,

The main focus was on:

- a) the frequency of communication (daily, weekly, monthly etc.),
- b) the form of communication (formal/informal; directly/indirectly; personally/via ambassadors, testimonials, representatives; via web 2.0 based applications like Youtube, Facebook, twitter, videos embedded on the homepage or via phone, written by mail, letter, TV spot, radio, leaflets, commercials in cinemas, etc.)
- c) the content of communication (orders, complaints, payments, contractual agreements, informing about production/processing steps, quality dimensions etc.)

Moreover, besides elaborating a static picture of the present status, also changes of communication flows during the growth process were considered. Out of this general analysis, we identified some special approaches to close the producer-consumer gap, namely the use of informal meeting spaces, social media and the role of food ambassadors. We were investigating these topics in greater detail by analyzing subsamples which provided the respective evidence.

Methods of data collection:

The methods of data collection were highly case dependent and not isolated from data collection for other tasks. Still, in all cases, officially accessible as well as internally provided documents were analyzed. The analysis of documents on communication included mapping the internal communication between different actors along the chain as far as documented through memos, internal newsletters etc. Furthermore, the communication towards the consumer via advertisements, product labeling, leaflets, events, etc. was analyzed in quantitative as well as in qualitative terms (i.e. how often, which kind of messages, by which actor along the supply chain etc.).

Moreover, we conducted semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders along the food chain, which were complemented if necessary by additional personal meetings or phone-calls for clarification and validation of obtained results. The interviews with key informants along the supply chain provided insights on the effectiveness of such communication and on perceived success and problems. Besides, the interviews also revealed what possibilities consumers have to reach the primary producer or how to file complain, do reclamations and to raise concerns in these feedback loops. In addition, the interviews also allowed assessing changes in communication over the entire growth process.

We visualized the results in a table where the communication for each actor with other actors was listed according to frequency, form and content. The mapping of the different forms of communication between actors along the chain helped to identify what ways there are to carry producer identity through the chain up to the point of sale and what the existing and potential feedback loops from consumers to producers are.



5. General Findings

5.1. General observations over all cases

➤ Relationships along the chain:

- Mid-scale values based food chains are characterized by a high degree of interpersonal relationships (face-to-face) between primary producers and downstream value chain partner(s) [e.g. even in 'larger cases' like Biocoop - all shop managers' report that they actually meet their producers regularly at least in the case of small producers, who deliver the products themselves].
- It appears to be a decisive characteristic in most cases to have a common understanding with the partners along the chain (i.e. Planika claims to be successful in explaining their management philosophy and priorities to all stakeholders in the food chain. Järvifisu states that partners know the circumstances of the fishermen and have a common language with them). In addition, it is also found crucial to share the same motives and convictions, ideas and visions and to communicate on an eye level. This in turn has positive implications for the identification of partners with the supply chain.
- The interests of farmers are taken seriously, which is shown in the higher communication efforts invested in giving them a say (see f.i. Landwege, Røros, Achleitner or Biocoop). They are involved in decision-making processes and are addressed as equal partners in a very open way, with communication on eye level (see Kiuruvesi and the tender calls, Bohlsener Mühle, Bio vom Berg, Landwege). Primary producers are thus very well integrated in the supply chains. Moreover, it can be said that in general people have the feeling of being able to speak openly with each other and share knowledge with other stakeholders (see Ekodar – "*sharing with each other sensitive information like the selling quantities at the end of the year convey and support the feeling of trust!*"). All cases consider it crucial keeping each other up to date and to be transparent. Therefore the informative attitude respectively the flow of information along the chain is very high. This leads also to a higher identification with the value chain and the final product (Examples: Planika; Røros - "*We support each other, we owe each other success, we have the feeling of sitting in the same boat*").

➤ Internal communication depends on the legal form and the organizational structure:

See for instance, Bio vom Berg and Landwege: being organized as cooperatives, producers as well as private persons who are members have a right to vote in the yearly general assembly and in the case of Landwege, there are representatives even on the board. Also in the Finish municipality (Kiuruvesi), farmers are integrated in the public procurement processes. In contrast, in single enterprises, like the Biohof Achleitner or Bohlsener Mühle, farmers do not have the same possibilities to influence the development of the business. In the case of Bohlsener Mühle, however, farmers are organized in so called 'Erzeugergemeinschaften' (producer associations) in which they have a strong say.

➤ External communication:



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All cases provide basic information via homepages and furthermore use the whole range of publicity material. The professionalism differs very much though (e.g. some homepages are not kept up to date & their administration is weak [see Eko Zemaitija, Polar Shiitake, Upplandsbondens, Røros-meat] whereas others are made quite professional and include a lot of information on the case (Landwege, Biocoop, Achleitner etc.). Other means of communication include social media, radio (Eko Zemaitija & Biovallee), broadcasts on national television (Eko Zemaitija), innovative apps for mobile phones (Ekodar), large advertising campaigns on the TV, radio, internet & in big cities (see Biocoop), slides or short (half a minute) commercials in local program cinemas (Bio vom Berg), Youtube image/promotion clips (Upplandbon, Ekodar, Bio vom Berg), advertisements/announcements in local newspaper (Kiuruvesi, Bio vom Berg), press releases (Biovallee), sponsoring of events or caterings (Bio vom Berg) and information cards in hotels and restaurants (Polar Shiitake).

Some cases however lack sufficient communication or display only a very weak communication to consumers (i.e. Planika dairy, Røros meat) and no exchange between producers and consumers happens at all. However, although most cases consider publicity material, which gets distributed at the point of sale or a fair (like leaflets, brochures, information sheets etc. informing about farmers, the products and production sites), the most important communication channel to consumers, maybe the product itself and how it tastes is also a prominent factor concerning communication. [*An excellent and very successful communication to the customer is the ‘freshness’ of a product. A fresh and tasty bread, pastry or piece of cake is more convincing than many words (Bohlsener Mühle”); “In first sight we communicate our quality via the brand, its name and its high corporate identity. Apart from that, we let the products speak for themselves and just have the typical placements at the point of sale with classic marketing (Bio vom Berg).*”]

➤ Communication changes

[1] over time (e.g. when a project has just been initiated or a new product been launched, the need for and the intensity of the communication flow is high, whereas communication decreases and gets routinized when partners are used to make business with one another and when the details that had to be decided on are fixed) and

[2] with growth [an exception are the Danish Food Communities, which apply another growth strategy].

Usually however, there is a demand for intensifying the communication efforts due to an increase of actors involved - be it on a horizontal level concerning employees/farmers or on a vertical level concerning business partners - or due to higher purchased quantities. For example Bio vom Berg hired a new person in 2011 for improving the communication particularly with the small dairies. New means of communication become also necessary with the division of labor and the creation of i.e. new departments (see Biohof Achleitner or Bohlsener Mühle). This entails also that the communication to some partners who might be ‘less important’ decreases. Examples are Kolonihagen, where a reduced contact to producers is mentioned or Bohlsener Mühle: *“In the past, they were communicating more directly with farmers, whereas currently, communication with primary producers refers mainly to the producer associations. The contact to single farmers is reduced to either some large scale suppliers or some farmers who are in personal contact due to a long-term cooperation in non-business areas, a kind of friendship.”* The same holds true for the ‘Bio vom Berg’ case where an interviewee was saying that the contact is more intense with ones strategically and economically most important and immediate upstream and downstream partners than it might be



with particular single producers or minor important retail partners. Moreover, communication also professionalizes throughout growth processes. Indications can be found in the cases of Landwege, Biocoop, Ekodar or Planika with their marketing campaigns or Røros who hired a specific person for marketing. Some cases like Landwege, Biohof Achleitner, Ekolådan, Røros etc. make use of new communication/marketing channels like social media etc. or are eager to design an improved homepage or start a web-shop like i.e. Ekolådan, Achleitner, Landwege, Bio vom Berg. Additionally, over time, communication also formalizes/routinizes with growth (like in the case of Bio vom Berg & MPreis, in the customer service department at Achleitner or at Bohlsener Mühle → see the full reports for more information). Last but not least, growth processes evidently entail also new challenges concerning communication when it comes to fostering transparency towards the consumer (see i.e. the need for having informal meeting spaces, food ambassadors, promotion material, customer newsletters etc.).

- Communication is related to the national and cultural context:
In Denmark there is a very high degree of trust in organic certification/labelling. Again in Denmark written agreements are considered as a kind of insult showing lack of trust. Rather, oral agreements/non-formal contracts (see i.e. also in the Ekodar, Røros dairy case) have the advantage of conveying the feeling of trust between supply chain partners.
- Trust is bound to human capital:
In the Upplandsbondens case, there is a board member, who does the communication between farmers and the two slaughterhouses of which some farmers prefer either the one or the other and they primarily trust him to meet their preferences.
- Communication is related to features of the product:
 - [1] Product type: For instance, in the case of Polar Shiitake, there is comparably not a huge demand for communicating distinct quality criteria as mushrooms represent an exclusive product in a more or less non-competitive market. Another example is Bio Sunder with its highly commoditized herb products. Basically, products which do not carry as many values as others or better said, which do not include (numerous) complicated and/or sensitive processing steps, do understandably not need so many efforts in communicating. In the meat chain of Landwege a lot of knowhow has to be exchanged between partners, as well as in the case of Bio vom Berg, where for example dairy processors and producers are regularly in contact either face-to-face or via phone on issues like raw milk and processing quality, as processing steps are very sensitive. In turn, cereal or egg farmers are not as much in contact with their processors (the mill or the bakery) because the raw material is allegedly less sensitive.
 - [2] Product packaging: For instance in the Gram Slot case, all agricultural products are sold in unique and identifiable packets. Each of the packets has a short description of Gram Slot. Particularly breakfast products have the ability of providing the consumer with a light reading when seated at the breakfast table. Having the product in front of someone subconsciously makes one read the content 'just because it is there'. These packets function as a communicative platform that in this specific case obviously reaches a much larger number of consumers than most other advertisements.
 - [3] Product packaging regulations: some Bio vom Berg products like the small yoghurt in glass or small pieces of cheese due to lack of space limit the possibilities to display additional information apart from the product labels and the mandatory information. Another problem with smaller products like pieces of cheese is that the required labeling completely wraps and covers the product. One solution



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in this respect is a QR-code via which additional information can be obtained (like in the case of Ekodar telling the story of the cattle farmer where the animal grew up).

[4] The willingness of downstream retailing partners to display the desired information on or with the product: In the case of Upplandsbondens, the downstream retailing partner is reluctant to use the logo or to put names of processors/farmers on the product which therefore determines the composition of communication, leading to trade-offs regarding traceability.

➤ Communication is related to the geographical range and expansion of the supply chain.

It seems that the communication towards the suppliers (Achleitner claims to stand in a close relationship with his suppliers in Italy and Greece) appears to be stronger than to the purchasers and consumers (see Polar Shiitake, Bohlsener Mühle and Bio Sunder). A contrary example is Norway, where within the Røros dairy chain, neither farmers organized in the cooperative Økomat Røros nor the Røros dairy itself has any contact with farmers from outside the region delivering milk to the dairy.

➤ The form of communication depends on who is addressed:

For instance particularly in box schemes word-of-mouth seems to be important for gaining new consumers. Moreover, in the Landwege case the 'world' of the producer determines which form of communication is preferred. Some of their farmers still like the fax machine for receiving messages. They consider fax as more suitable as it is robust and can be standing in the aisle or even at the worksite. Moreover, the arriving fax is visible for everybody who passes the machine. The message is 'ready' on a piece of paper that can be taken away and be stuck on to the packing facility and farmers usually call back. Another example were the 'world' of the consumer determines which communication format can be used at all is Eko Zemaitija in Lithuania where older people and people in rural areas are not used to web-based application tools for communicating.

➤ Communication efforts are often facing limitations:

[1] **Financial limitations.** Upplandsbondens cannot afford to employ a person dealing with market related activities nor do they have the money to do the retail shop demonstrations, which are considered however as a very good way to meet and convince consumers. Røros-meat has no money for doing a proper social media marketing and for long time was not able to afford developing a suitable packaging adapted for retail sale. Eko Zemaitija would like to have a new leaflet available for consumers in every selling place, advertising their dairy products. However, the cooperative does not have sufficient funds for that and therefore has to exploit other means of advertising, direct sales are important source of information that is passed on by word-of-mouth and is effective attracting new consumers.

[2] **Lack of interest** from consumer side. In the Swedish Ekolådan case the field trips with consumers were not that sought after. In the Landwege case, the store employees are not really approached with questions by customers although they would like to receive more inquiries and remarks regarding the origin or production processes. In contrast, customers are more interested in where they find the shelf with or without these or that ingredients. More specific questions are very limited and most of customers are not asking questions at all. The YouTube clips of Upplandsbondens that encouraged consumers to go and visit a farm and the ones of Bio vom Berg are not really successful.



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The Danish Food Communities aspired to foster consumer involvement and wanted to facilitate social learning on food and sustainability issues in more general terms. However, few members felt confident engaging in a dialogue with farmers or even other activists regarding food quality and wider issues of sustainability. Last but not least, the efforts invested by Polar Shiitake to increase the knowledge on mushroom entrepreneurship, health impacts and on the use of mushrooms did not really pay-off and activities soon stopped after the project was closed.

[3] **Lack of suitable staff** for recruitment. Eko Zemaitija has no specialist with sufficient IT-knowledge in order to maintain and update the website, although improving and maintaining the website would even get paid for as they would like to get more online media attention. They moreover do not have somebody in the team who is familiar with social media communication so they would need to hire somebody who cares about the presence in social media. Currently the management has decided that the salary for this person would not be worth the positive effects from e.g. Facebook communication.

5.2. Formalized communication (inside the business and along the supply chain):

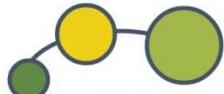
As already described at the beginning, by formalized communication we mean the standardized or routine communication, which keeps the business running.

➤ Frequency:

The frequency of communication ranges from several times a day to at least ones a year and is related to the content and form of communication. It is related to aspects of seasonality (communication is of course higher in the harvesting season when the products get sold and supply and demand do have to get cross-checked) as well as the kind of topic or subject (i.e. a product, service or an organizational issue) that is addressed. For instance, if a new product, a large investment, a change in the internal organization or a new campaign is planned, the related communication is very intense because strategic planning or developing marketing campaigns require a frequent communication on different levels, internally, as well as with chain partners and service providers. Personal meetings are usually less frequent with chain partners, taking place a few times up to at least once per year. Internally within the businesses, personal meetings are taking place more often of course. Besides, the frequency varies concerning the topic/issue to be discussed and its urgency, importance i.e. whether something is wrong with the packaging, the boxes or the batch number. Principally, the frequency of communication (particularly of personal interactions/ contacts/ meetings) increases if important, delicate, sensitive topics (hygienic problems, new product or project) need to be discussed.

➤ Content:

The content of communication covers the whole variety of topics that businesses on the food sector have to deal with in supply chain management. To give some examples, the content of communication usually is about the following topics: product qualities, production standards, logistics, transportation, distribution, quality expectations, controls and requirements, processing techniques, packaging, schedules and timetables, marketing, accounting, investments, modernization, season/crop-planning, management, commissioning and so on and so forth. Again, the content of communication is related to the means and frequency of communication (sensitive issues occur rather seldom, but tend to be dealt with personally, whereas orderings or follow ups are part of the daily communication routine). Exceptional communication topics are research issues (in the case



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of Polar Shiitake or Järvifisu) who are in contact with respective institutes or the Kiuruvesi municipality who consults farmers when setting the criteria for the tenders in view of the process of competitive bidding. Other aspects of communication also cover discussions over internal guidelines, handbooks or strategy papers (i.e. Biocoop's charter which is displayed in all shops and on the website) or target the future production & processing strategy (Bio vom Berg). In addition, more or less all cases display an informative attitude towards the public and invest quite some efforts in raising awareness. In the respective publicity material, information folders and via their communication channels, the cases include information on organic agriculture, environmental protection and seasonality. For example in the case of Biocoop all employees who are responsible for the fruits and vegetable shelves wear an apron where is written "c'est pas de saison, c'est pas en rayon". Some publish cooking recipes, provide tips for the use of food or participate in events, workshops, fairs, meetings, organize farm festivals or post relevant news on social media. Landwege, in cooperation with the attached fellow associations, supports courses such as food education or environmental projects for kids. The territorial case studies with their comprehensive regional development approach (i.e. Bioregion Mühlviertel, Biodistretto and Biovallee) develop training material for the schools.

➤ Form:

Important forms of communication are direct and physical face-to-face contacts during formal or informal meetings. Formal communication includes general assemblies, board or owner meetings, internal workshops or appraisal talks, whereas informal means are fairs, festivals, seminars, farm visits, study tours, excursions etc. Furthermore the cases use electronic means of communication (e-mail, phone, fax, newsletters, homepages, social media, QR-Codes) and written/printed material (contractual agreements, supplying contracts, delivery receipts, invoices, but also flyers, leaflets, brochures, newspapers, magazines) as well as all configurations of audio-visual communication channels (radio, TV, cinema, Youtube-clips). And again, it is important to note, that the form of communication is strongly related to content and frequency.

Basically, before every communicative process the sender of a message has always to consider what the purpose (e.g. getting new business partners or attracting new consumers) and context (e.g. national, cultural, social, ethical...) of the communication is and how the content can best be mediated (which covers aspects of form and frequency).

For example, personal face-to-face communication is generally favored and it appears to be very important in all cases to meet from time to time (as often as suitable/feasible) face-to-face. This 'personal component' is of course especially crucial concerning business or long term planning meetings (see e.g. Bohlsener Mühle, Landwege, Achleitner) and for maintaining good and long standing relationships, for establishing trust and confidence (Røros dairy) and for demonstrating respect and appreciation. Comprehensively, the frequency of personal meetings is not comparable to the daily routine communication via phone and e-mail, which is generally sufficient for daily internal business issues, like supply and demand orders. The phone is preferred for quick follow-ups or discussing ad hoc problems, because people are fast and easy to reach and you get an immediate reply. The phone is thus used mainly for orderings (or, like in the Planika case to discuss milk quality issues). Orders are often additionally fixed via e-mails as this form of communication is perceived to be similar to written contracts. Hence, partners prefer e-mail communication when the content of communication is about agreements on prices, delivery amounts, or qualities (in some cases delivery amounts and supplying



volumes are fixed by signed contracts though) as e-mails display somehow a mid-way between oral agreements and signed contracts (see e.g. Reports of Ekolådan, Bio vom Berg). Additionally, e-mail is also considered to be quick and efficient and the advantage is that the exchange does not have to be simultaneous, in case people cannot be reached on the phone.

5.3. Standard consumer information

Information is provided to consumers to deepen their knowledge on producers, products, processing, ingredients, providence etc. In the sense of our definition of communication, the notification by the recipient of the information is missing here. It remains a one way communication, although it is more than plain advertisement and often geared to provide better traceability. In the following we list a number of examples:

- Landwege places signs in the shops and puts up posters with information on and pictures of farmers. Information signs and boards help with particular explanations. The communication strategy is based on creating an impression of personal contact.
- Ekolådan: Consumers get a one A4-double printed black-and-white page newsletter that comes with every box. One page is filled with recipes related to the box content, the other contains general information and lists the products and their producers. On the homepage of Ekolådan, consumers can also read more about the most important delivering farms (including a Q&A section with farmers). The major part is a short article written by a different journalist every week. This article deals usually with topics broadly connected to food, environment and animal welfare. Thus, the newsletter is not used to market Ekolådan but more to “educate” and influence consumers about issues important to them. This ‘blog’ is also posted on the homepage. The blog is more political and thus a way of communicating the values held by SBP foundation and Ekolådan to consumers. The newsletter aims to convey for the values of traceability, quality, freshness, closeness, and trust by showing pictures of the farmer’s and adding narratives of origin, localities and production methods. However, the weekly newsletter, though being a pro-active and information providing communication form only reaches limited customers who are already tied to the business.
- Biohof Achleitner: The communication to the regular customers of the vegetable boxes via the ‘Kundenbrief’ (kind of customer newsletter) is working quite well and is also perceived to be an appropriate medium and fitting tool for a box scheme. Moreover, the enterprise aspires to set up a professional web-shop with an improved customer surface and easier handling of orderings. In addition Biohof Achleitner has put together a folder that customers can order including a lot of information material.
- Biocoop has posters showing the businesses’ Charta that has to be displayed in all the shops. Some shops would then adopt specific means and tools such as displaying a map with all the local producers, presenting each producer on a card displayed over her/his products etc.

In 1998 they launched the first edition of the Biocoop’s magazine ‘Consom’action’ (appearing every 3 months, respectively every 2 months since 2008) which is largely present in the shops. It is financed by the shops that buy it in proportion of their turnover. In 2001 there has been done a huge advertising campaign called “ensemble pour plus de sens” [“together for more meaning”] with producers and processors in the shops. 2004 followed the campaign “organic products, yes I can” (a



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range of cheap organic products, with reduced profit margins in cooperation with the suppliers) and in 2011 a first large campaign on the TV, radio, internet and in big cities called “our organic products have nothing to hide” was launched. These are however just a few examples of Biocoop’s campaigns. All Biocoop shops have additionally their own website with receipts, products’ presentations, information about specific events with an access to national Biocoop newsletters and the website etc.

- Gram Slot sends out a newsletter once or twice a month. This newsletter is sent to the recipients on a mail list, which can be joined through the Gram slot webpage.
- Upplandsbondens does not have much contact to the end-consumers, unless consumers contact them by themselves. There are a number of leaflets (marketing material) describing the products and the farmers behind it (for shops and consumers). When they still had the money for it, they developed a number of brochures that they distributed to supermarkets and handed out to staff and consumers during market activities. These brochures describe Upplandsbondens in general and once in a while promote for instance a specific farmer and recommend a recipe with a less common meat cut. They have a homepage with contact information about the farmers (e-mail/phone). Not all members are displayed there, however, either because not all farmers have agreed to be displayed or the homepage is not updated (although they consider this being important and therefore know there is a need for improvement).
- The Biovallée provides information on their website and via the ‘observatory of practices and know-how’.
- Bioregion Mühlviertel introduces their farmers on the homepage.
- Ekodar: The communication efforts towards consumers attempt to reconnect consumers and producers. This is realized mainly via the establishment of a QR-Code. The code allows consumers to check the origin of the meat and indicates detailed information about the farms’ location, its size and the amount of cattle held. This supports the value of traceability, which is their main competing argument as well as the value of animal welfare (as via a QR-code there is the possibility to directly gain ready-access to numerous facts about production conditions without the need to look for single producers on a homepage). However, they also have a homepage, leaflets and Youtube clips.
- The ‘EKO Žemaitija’ cooperative also has QR code with its contact information but does not put it on flyers, leaflets etc. and it is also not found on most of the products.
- ‘Bio vom Berg’ farmers are indirectly put in relation to the consumers by the cooperative who promotes them by putting their names on brochures and leaflets at the point of sale. For example, if the cooperative places a half-page advertisement in the local newspaper for organic-hay milk, they attempt to present also the farmer behind the product. However, not every farmer would be interested in being presented there to the consumers.
- The homepage of Kolonihagen contains information about producers. Information on producers is given by Kolonihagen at the delivery of the boxes.

5.4. Standard consumer feedback

Feedback is received either in the frame of informal meeting spaces (at tastings, demos, fairs, festivals, field visits etc.), more formally per e-mail or phone via a customer service department, on the homepage



or via the Facebook page. This feedback is claimed to be forwarded to the respective departments or the responsible persons in most of the cases. Our impression is that this is not done sufficiently by all the investigated cases. Producers are only weakly and insufficiently linked to the entity functioning as an entry point of the feedback (be it the customer service department, the homepage, Facebook or a shop assistant), which means that the feedback rarely reaches the farmers (see examples of Biohof Achleitner, Ekolådan, Bio vom Berg). If however the feedback reaches them indirectly via e-mail/phone, it is mostly negative feedback on product quality, as in contrast to the informal meetings spaces where mainly positive feedback is given. An exception of an indirect feedback channel where also positive feedback arrives is Facebook which (with the ‘like button’ in fact displays an easy way for consumers to express primarily positive feedback!). To conclude, based on the data collected, it can only be said which kind of potential feedback loops there are, but not how well they are in fact working or functioning.

- In the case of the Food Communities there is no direct contact between producers and the majority of consumers. If there are any inquiries, they are passed on through the supply activity group, which conveys the feedback (by individuals or the one collected on FB or e-mail from several persons) on to the farmers. Subsequently, this group reports the reply from the farmer given on phone back via Facebook or the website within a few days. A concrete example refers to requests from the group regarding the physical product quality (e.g. why the vegetables were of moderate size compared to earlier growing seasons). The reply then was a post on Facebook by the supply group explaining that it had to do with the particular growth conditions that year.
- Gram slot maintains a webpage with e-mail addresses of people working at Gram Slot available. The most common way of contact is the phone though. The receptionist explains that customers mainly call with inquiries about the content of the farm shop.
- Røros-Kjott receives feedback during demos they do in the retail store (Rema1000). In addition, consumers usually send mails and ask questions like where to find products or to tell if there is a lack of products in shops. Most of the feedback is positive but sometimes there are also critical questions.
- Røros –Meieriet also does demos in shops (about 20 per month on national level) and other places (e.g. fairs and some food festivals) where they get direct face-to-face feedback. Apart from that via e-mail, phone and Twitter and Facebook are most used for gaining feedback.
- Ekolådan gets feedback via the customer service department (phone and mail) and via e-mails on the homepage (approx. 150 calls and 350 e-mails per week; 2 employees working 12 hours per week). Producers have hardly any communication with the customer service at Ekolådan (same as for Biohof Achleitner). Feedback is forwarded to the producer in question mostly by the senior purchaser of the SBP-foundation or growers are given feedback from Ekolådan concerning what consumers have said over the year at the yearly growers meeting (about quality, varieties, crops etc.). The feedback concerns complaints (to get refunds), changes in the orders or changes of entry codes to buildings. Negative feedback from consumers is more common than positive, since consumers contact the customer service when something has happened or when they have not received an expected product. However, it is often formulated in a very nice way, so even complaints include aspects of “positive feedback” and appreciation. The interviewed people at the customer service department believe the positive feedback they receive from their customers is quite unique.
- Upplandsbondens has a homepage with contact details. However, business representatives and especially farmers are contacted by consumers via e-mail/phone only rarely, although consumers can



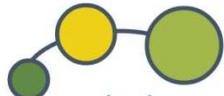
contact those farmers who - like the board members - are displayed also on the homepage. Rather however, board members are contacted which happens 2-4 times/month asking questions like "*How do you slaughter the animals? How are they raised?*" Theoretically, feedback could also be given via Facebook, at retail store tastings or to the meat box entrepreneur directly (who does not exist anymore though). Due to a lack of employees they do not have a regular customer service.

- In the case of the Kiuruvesi municipality students give feedback in a note book laid out in school canteens in which they can say what dishes they would like to have and what was good or bad about the food. Apart from this, feedback is received directly at various occasions and they are likely to get feed-back in some form mainly via word of mouth/gossip, at least, if there is something to complain about. In such a small community, the producers are generally known and people have to do with each other anyway at school board meetings, parents meetings, hobbies, professional contacts etc. Occasionally, the municipality gets feedback from farmers regarding product development needs, uprising questions and overall experiences in view of anticipation of the next tender call.
- Like in the other finish case, also at Järvifisu most of the feedback from the end customers (usually complaints about the quality and price (positive feed-back is rare) comes directly. As the people know each other, this means that feedback is given in passing in different occasions, in stores, on the street, when doing free-time activities together or at community meetings.
- Kolonihagen's possibilities to give feedback are to either contact producers directly (contact details being displayed on the homepage) or indirectly via Kolonihagen's Facebook and Twitter accounts or via the homepage, e-mail or phone.
- Eko-Zemaitija has no formal feedback loops installed apart from the predominant direct marketing at local farmers markets. Phone and especially electronic feedback like e-mail is not very popular → on average only 1 phone call per week and 1–2 e-mails per year from consumers. Overall, feedback is given rarely. One interviewee estimated that this might be because older consumers in provinces do not use e-mail.
- Bohlsener Mühle receives inquiries via the central office, most often via e-mail, but also on the phone and by posted mail. The receptionist then passes it on further to the responsible division. When Bohlsener Mühle develops a new product, pre-tests take place that include getting feedback of selected target groups. Apart from that, Bohlsener Mühle is not characterised by a close link between consumers and producers and usually there is no interaction between crop farmer and consumer. Exceptions are specific events such as open farm days or the annual mill festival, das 'Mühlenfest' in Bohlsen.
- At Landwege, giving feedback is relatively easy and well-working at the Landwege shops (via assistants in all supermarkets or office staff). At the regular meetings, relevant issues can then be discussed when members meet. Overall, the feedback loops seem to work well with Landwege cooperative. A rather unique example is that in the case of Landwege also private persons take the role of passing on feedback ("*Currently, we have a man who loves to talk to people; he is our spokesman and our representative in town. He tells stories about us and he brings back the messages. For example, once the girl in the bakery outlet realised that our boxes did not look clean from the outside. That was an important hint, we had to fix that. It was easy but you need somebody who tells you.*")



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- Bio vom Berg's feedback works primarily via the reclamation management set up together with the retailer MPreis. In rural areas this works on a more personal level via employees where people like in the Kiuruvesi municipality know each other whereas in cities with a lot of casual/ occasional/ changing customers and with a lot of students, this is more difficult). Another good possibility for consumer to give feedback to Bio vom Berg is via Facebook. Primary producers get most feedback though at the yearly farmers market or at the informal events organized by the cooperative.
- Biohof Achleitner has a well working customer service department (approx. 1700 e-mails and 1500 telephone calls each week concerning delivery breaks, unsubscribing, change of the delivery address, type of box ordered or adapting/adjusting box content). The 6000 to 8000 boxes ordered weekly result in only minor complaints. There are 20 to 25 reclamations/week concerning delivery problems, e.g. if boxes put at the wrong place or delivery times not met due to delays in packaging, traffics or car breakdowns and around 100 addressing quality complaints, e.g. if vegetables are not ripe enough or slushy, muddy or rotten). Generally, there is more negative direct feedback in form of reclamations than positive feedback. Producers rather get contacted when something was wrong with a product or the drivers get to hear if something was wrong with the delivery. Indirectly they measure feedback by the steadily increasing number of box system subscribers. Positive feedback indirectly reaches the producers when the purchase & sales department orders for instance higher amounts of certain products. That's when the primary producers feel that certain products get well accepted and appreciated by the box customers.
- In Biocoop stores, shop employees and managers answer and receive client's requests and questions. Direct links are enhanced/favoured, both with consumers through the staff's availability and with producers at the shop scale. They also run a website with consumers entering comments and questions (visited quite often by consumers but only few contain suggestions or demands like to contact a given producer/supplier or to market a given product, to organize this or that kind of activity, present a book, organize some health/wellbeing activity in the shop etc.). Besides feedback on specific products is very rare (consumers would rather express their feedback directly in the shop).
- Ekodar constantly forwards complaints by e-mail but has no further feedback loops installed.
- At Planika they organize meetings and other social events with consumers and presents and promotes the brand at fairs. "Feedback loops" or communication flows in this food chain are usually used for improving the satisfaction of consumers, the quality of the product and the relationships between the actors.



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6. Specific findings

We are specifically looking into ways how bridge the distance between producers and consumers, foster consumer trust and maintain producer identification in longer chains. We identified further strongly related aspects within the case study reports, which appeared to be particularly interesting in this respect, which we therefore chose investigating more in depth. The three issues identified are:

- 1.) **Informal meeting spaces:** The role of informal ways of communication appears to withhold a strong potential for establishing, fostering and maintaining identification with the value chain as well as for building up trust.
- 2.) **Web 2.0-based applications** and above all especially social media like Facebook seem to display a promising tool to close the gap between producers and consumers. Besides, they have the potential to foster links between actors of the supply chain in a vertical way as well as between actor groups on horizontal levels. Therefore, we want to investigate more profoundly, which opportunities social media provide for growing organic enterprises to maintain trust and transparency, why and in how far enterprises make use of them and what the possibilities are to foster direct and indirect exchange processes between producers and consumers.
- 3.) **Food ambassadors:** The personal appearance of farmers in supermarkets and at events on the producer side as well as shop assistants, pupils, teachers, relatives and friends as regular consumers etc. on the side of intermediaries and dedicated consumers can function as conveyors, vectors and/or representatives of the value chain and may therefore foster identification. They may substitute the former face-to-face relation between producer and consumer on a representative scale as examples from the fair trade movement underpin.

Our **main line of argumentation** follows the assumption that for achieving a strong identification (entailing also concepts of trust and loyalty) it is important to install functioning feedback loops beyond standard reclamation procedures and to provide producers and consumers with a variety of direct exchange possibilities and means to reconnect. Ideally, this happens in the frame of informal meeting spaces. But what exactly do we mean with informal meeting spaces, with social media and web-based communication tools or with food ambassadors.

6.1 Informal meeting spaces:

The role of informal meeting spaces is to foster identification, trust and the feeling of belonging together. They display a promising way for community building or the increase the bridging and/or bonding social capital (between groups internally or externally with other interest groups). For instance, in quite some cases, it appears that farmers are not in a very close contact with each other and do not exchange much although being part of the same cooperative (see for instance the Slovenian Ekodar case) or delivering mainly to the same purchaser. That's where informal meeting spaces could provide a strong impetus for establishing stronger bonds.

The following examples describe what kind of such meeting spaces were identified in the single cases, partly among producers, partly for consumers, partly to bridge between the two.



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- In the Swedish Ekolådan case, there were farm visits organized for quite some time for box subscribers (and other interested consumers). There were also theme nights and they cooperated with the ‘Kulturhuset’ (the City of Stockholm’s “Culture House”) to arrange root vegetable seminars, courses and lectures. However, they stopped due to lack of interest from consumers. Between Ekolådan and farmers, informal meetings and conversations mainly occur when they deliver their products. Last but not least, Ekolådan participates in fairs such as the Nordic Organic food fair where discussions with consumers go beyond prices and deliveries.
- Upplandsbondens also attends food fairs, visits food galas or participates in various festivities. Then there is at least one field day in summer, when members are invited to a study visit somewhere in Sweden. Usually these are farm visits where a farmer shows other members his farm, his energy solutions regarding biomass heating, solar cells etc. and demonstrates low stress stock handling methods. Members can also bring along their families and they barbecue hamburgers together. On a horizontal level farmers (who are often also board members) are from the same region and many of them meet also on other occasions as well, e.g. at the ‘Swedish farmers’ association (LRF) meetings. With respect towards providing consumers with informal meeting spaces with the producers, Upplandsbondens did tastings in the regional COOP stores for some time, but there is no money left for doing so anymore.
- In the Kiuruvesi municipality communication is largely based on interpersonal relationships as people know each other in private via school board meetings, parents meetings, hobbies, and professional contacts. It is a rural area and many are involved with primary production somehow.
- Järvifisu participates in various grass root activities linked to fishery such as the yearly trolling competition where exchange between people happens within a rather limited area (mainly people from the municipality) but the more in a familiar atmosphere.
- In the case of Eko-Zemaitija in Lithuania, communication among the members of the cooperative is neither steady nor frequent. Usually the farmers with similar size farms discuss their position/opinion on strategic issues together. Since mid-2014, in order to improve internal communication, an internal network for cooperative members was introduced on ‘EKO Žemaitija’ website. However, farmers use the intranet not yet actively. It can be assumed that the reasons for the low use is that the intranet in the cooperative is still a novelty and the head of administration and some members of the board are of older age. With consumers, an informal exchange takes place mainly during farmers markets, fairs, exhibitions and other events.
- Activists (or members) of the Danish Food Communities do meet physically at the community distribution centre once every week, when the packages are being assembled. This meeting typically involves extensive informal communication, while the activists are working together. Sometimes it can be that the members of the community have the opportunity to meet the farmer in person at some of the individual community distribution centres when farmers deliver the vegetables themselves. Further possibilities are meetings in the individual homes of the activists, which are used for hosting meetings of the activity groups, which also involves extensive informal communication. Therefore, identification is mainly achieved on a horizontal level between the members and less with the farmers. There has been the intention to do farm visits which should enable producer-consumer interfaces but as explained already above, there has been limited interest.



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- At Gram Slot numerous cultural and leisure activities take place that foster exchange (i.e. moving the cows to a new shed, a number of high school students weeding onions in order to earn money to finance study trips). Attached to that, the manager of Gram Slot gives presentations primarily in various social settings (social clubs, unions, companies, schools, etc.).
- On an internal level, the Bohlsener Mühle does monthly cooking evenings for staff and friends of the mill or holds lectures that take place in the canteen area in the basement of the office building. Moreover, there is a local bowling and a running group (the ‘Lauftreff’) and excursions to closely organic business partners or organic courses for employees get organized. Then, the annual Mill festival or the traditional annual ‘eel feast’ (‘Aalessen’) can be named attracting also external visitors. Business to business wise, they participate in organic fairs, organise a “Grell Kundenabend” (Grell is one of the larger regional organic wholesalers), and there is a network of organic businesses in the area (Öko Regio Network). In addition there are non-profit projects such as support for the local museum, the shops and bistro in the ‘Künstlerbahnhof Uelzen’ or the continuation of the Alena project.
- Landwege has organized on-farm stays of a couple of days for shop assistants during their training (and if wanted for consumer members and guests). In addition, there are farm visits, which were particularly important regarding the identification of members from the consumer side of the cooperative during the fundraising campaign in 2013. Moreover, Landwege offers special events so that customers can connect with farm people and learn more about products and production. For instance, Landwege is inviting consumers to participate in evening events focusing on hot topics and aiming to connect with people and spread information on products and the shops.
- Externally, Bio vom Berg organizes field visits (“Ackertage”) between farmers, cooperative employees and consumers and does a yearly farmers market. Internally, important lunch meetings or cycling tours between a person from the retailer and the cooperative manager (in which the lines between the private leisure time and business get blurred) help creating identification.

Within the office of the cooperative there is a very open and regular communication, mainly informally during coffee, cigarette or snack breaks or at lunch. In addition, informal talks are possible at the internal workshop for staff of the cooperative which is organized as an excursion to another place. Other possibilities for informal exchange are attached to formal meetings, i.e. when Bio vom Berg initiates and organizes excursions between a) farmers and retailing partners as the exchange between them was very limited if not even non-existing b) between farmers and technicians/experts to think about which varieties can be cultivated and where there is space for improvement.

Another example of providing informal exchange possibilities (in this case internally on a horizontal level between farmers) are farm visits that were organized by the new group of north Tyrolean milk suppliers with their counterparts in South Tyrol in ‘Bio vom Berg’s’ new supply chain of fruit yoghurt.

- Biohof Achleitner does an open farm fest once a year for external visitors, farmers and employees (including several side events only for employees that should work as team building activities). Some employees and suppliers are even invited to private family parties. Occasionally, there are field visits done with consumer groups. Besides, there are thematic cooking courses offered. Apart from this, informal meeting spaces are again mainly attached to formal meeting spaces like the composting workshops once a year were farmers exchange amongst each other or like training courses for employees.



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- The Bioregion Mühlviertel organizes a yearly farmer's market event. Once, due to the rainy weather there were less visitors, which then however luckily resulted in a higher exchange between the farmers. The organisation participates in fairs and publishes an excursion folder and a hiking guide. The hiking guide lists farms or enterprises to walk by and via the excursion folder visits to certain members of the ecoregion can be booked.
- At Biocoop, most shops organize regular events with local producers who would come and present their products and meet consumers. Some also organize farm visits with their producers in order for consumers to get to know the farm, the farmer and his work. At the local scale, some shops organize meetings and workshops with other chain operators, or take part to meetings organized by other organizations such as regional organic institutions, for instance events and meetings specifically devoted to public procurement, or "Bion Days", two days devoted to economic actors involved in the organic chain, etc.
- Biovallee regularly organizes open-house days once a year including visits of local initiatives and participates in other local events where Biovallee is present
- Kolonihagen arranges events where consumers can meet producers (i.e. food festivals).
- Røros-Kjott & Røros-Meieriet do shop demos and attend fairs and food festivals.
- Polar Shiitake did a four year project once, aiming at boosting the mushroom knowledge among the producers and the consumers. It was carried out by the regional authorities in co-operation with the research institutes which however waned due to lack of interest.
- Planika dairy organises open house days once per year including visits of Planikas' museum. They also plan to organize on-farm school camps in the near future.

To a certain extent, more or less all cases demonstrate attempts to provide consumer and producers with informal meeting spaces and opportunities where like-minded people can exchange (which ideally lead towards strengthening mutual identification). Moreover, the farmers are generally well aware of the importance of consumer contact and they support it wherever and whenever they can. Landwege: *"Sometimes when the driver was not available, my husband liked to drive to town - just because of keeping in touch with the shop(s) and with the customers – even though, it wouldn't make sense to have the farm manager spending that much time just driving."* A farmer in the case of Biohof Achleitner stated: *"...our problem is that we are simply not able to convey towards the public, that we (ann.: organic farmers) are not like they perceive us. And we also do not have the possibilities of communicating this correctly. That's why I would actually like to have to do again more with consumers, also with respect towards sales. [...] these things would be crucial, to teach the future customers, so to speak..."*[]. The possibilities for direct exchange possibilities during informal meeting spaces depend however on proximity (determining whether people accidentally know each other, i.e. by living in the same valley, village or municipality as we saw in the Kiuruvesi or the Järvifisu case) and are bound to social capital (e.g. being part of the same association or to share the same interest and hobbies). Last but not least they have to do also with the business type (i.e. since Landwege is an umbrella cooperative that connects primary producers and consumers, the characteristics and main values of Landwege are based on the interconnection between producer and consumer).



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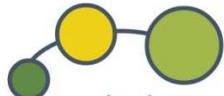
6.2 Food ambassadors:

As producers have limitations to make use of informal meeting spaces and only dedicated consumers do so or read the rich info material, active measures are needed to install food ambassadors. The case studies display a broad variety of food ambassadors, which potentially mediate values face-to-face and pass on knowledge. His or her main role is to substitute what has been lost compared to the direct contact between producer and consumer, which is given in direct marketing and take over the role of a representative. It is however important to note that it is not enough to create the impression of being credible to the downstream addressee (otherwise we would enter plain marketing/advertisement considerations³). In contrast, also the farmers or processors, or the business/cooperative/enterprise accept someone with sufficient background knowledge and thus credibility to take over the role of being a real ambassador. As we will see, the cases set certain activities, take measures and offer incentives in order to make people become ambassadors (and thus multipliers of their values). For example by equipping employees/staff (i.e. via further trainings) or committed consumers with knowledge, these become potential food ambassadors. According to this definition, even people actively involved in the supply chain, or partners who up and foremost display a business relationship with the case (for instance employees, shop assistants or famous brand testimonials etc.) may be potential ambassadors. The main point is that both sides (usually the producers or the enterprise on the one and the consumers on the other side) acknowledge the ambassador as not acting out of business consideration only, but of personal conviction. An ambassador is thus successful, when he or she is able to transmit values in a way the recipient(s)/addressee(s) can identify with, thus one aim of an ambassador is to strengthen identification, which is an important requisite for loyalty. And in this regard, the effect which employees might have as multipliers/ambassadors on their environment (friends and family), influencing and shaping the image of the enterprise in the public perception may be decisive in those cases, where word-of-mouth is actually the main marketing strategy attracting new consumers (see particularly for box schemes).

We identified the following traits of food ambassadorship:

- At Ekolådan, journalists, guest chefs, guest writers and others give input to the newsletter. They can actually take the role of ambassadors since they - being considered as experts in their fields of profession - usually display a profound knowledge in the food and farming area and - by gaining deeper insights while having to deal with Ekolådan during their engagement – maybe keep on carrying further Ekolådan’s business logic, values and convictions and message. However, this is something that happens, without a plan or strategy. They almost rely exclusively on word-of-mouth “marketing” of convinced customers coupled with exposure from their delivery vans, with van drivers working as “ambassadors” for the product.
- In the finish cases of Polar Shiitake and Kiuruvesi there are a number of domestic online marketing networks (i.e. a platform listing where to find local producers or organic retailers, or a network like ‘karelia’ which comprises restaurants and caterers who use products of mainly small and medium producers that are focusing on organic, local and niche products. So on the respective webpages, these networks provide information on small and medium-sized businesses in the food sector and promote them). Though not being very popular at the moment, these platforms theoretically could

³Measures like providing vouchers, discounts or lotteries (particularly on Facebook by sharing a post in order to participate in winning prices), which manipulate consumers in one way or another to become promoters for their brand/enterprise are not to be seen as training/recruiting “food ambassadors”.



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help customers find local food businesses and to find out what products are available in their respective region, thus improving the customer-meets-producers interface. However, most of the enterprises listed in these networks focus on specific products and the customers usually seek places where they can buy a range of different products. These networks are thus more an additional marketing channel for single enterprises than a real food ambassador. For Polar Shiitake, the fine-dining restaurants would be a potential pool for ambassadors, but for now, the information does not reach the end customers. Polar Shiitake would need to approach more actively those who sell their products, and develop product information together with the fine-dining restaurants who know the needs of their customers. However, it is very doubtful whether they even want to target their end consumer with such increased communication efforts as they are operating within a still very uncompetitive market segment. Organic mushroom production is definitely a niche segment and the need to communicate detailed added values is comparatively low.

- The Järvifisu partners have had visitors (mostly school classes) who come visit their production hall and who could subsequently be potential food ambassadors.
- At the Danish Food Communities, the activity groups are ‘gate keepers’ or interfaces in relation to the producers, who communicate primarily with the representative of the activity group. In practice, that is primarily the supply group, which deals with sourcing and setting the arrangement with the farmers regarding what should be included in the weekly delivery. So they are a good example for food ambassadors towards the other members of the food community with whom (apart from prices and amounts) also values and qualities get discussed.
- In the Ekodar case there is no real food ambassador found. What comes closest is that they have an athletic who theoretically could work as an ambassador (i.e. when emphasizing healthiness of the Ekodar food products or when he is involved in face to face promotions at fairs or at schools visits). However, the border towards being a mere marketing testimonial is blurred here and it is highly doubtful whether the two sides (consumers and also producers) consider him as a credible example of a food ambassador. Another possibility could be the TV reporters who in 2011 in the frame of an independent commercial checked the functionality and authenticity of the bar (QR) code between farmers and consumers. It is however highly doubtful that they have obtained sufficient knowledge on the brand so that they could serve as ambassadors.
- At Landwege, shop assistants withhold a great potential for being food ambassadors. A lot of efforts are invested in coaching and training them which is not only very helpful for the work in the shop but as well for the farmers as both sides learn a lot. Apart from them, their food ambassadors are mostly private persons: [i.e. *“Currently, we have a man who loves to talk to people; he is our spokesman and our representative in town.”*]
- Also in the Biocoop case, producers or suppliers occasionally do products’ presentations in specific on shop. Additionally, there are shop employees and managers, who through their presence and availability in shops, could theoretically take the role of food ambassadors, but as their main motivation is to sell, it is questionable whether producers and consumers accept them being able to credibly, authentically and objectively convey values.
- At Røros-Kjott well known cooks use their dairy products in TV programs, whereas at Røros-Meieriet it is the dairies employees, having personal trust based relationships with local customers which are to be named. Besides, “spearhead customers” like from fine dining restaurants, hotels or cooks that



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are regular business partners and show a strong affinity with the businesses (i.e. high overlap of values, attitudes etc.) function as multipliers/conveyors of values between producers and consumers.

- In the Bio vom Berg case, food ambassadors are most prominently found in the surrounding of the various organizations or initiatives they deal with. For instance the staff working at an institute for adult education (Haus der Begegnung) who do organic fair regional breakfasts, the nature parks (Zillertaler Naturpark, Naturpark Karwendel) environmental NGOs (Biovielfalt) or private persons ranging from researchers, politicians, organic farming organization representatives to followers on Facebook are good examples.
- At Biohof Achleitner it is primarily employees that are educated to become potential food ambassadors during further education trainings (which also strengthen the feeling of belonging together and foster identification) and committed consumers (e.g. the Facebook group) who, via word-of-mouth, take the role of food ambassadors.
- In the Bioregion Mühlviertel this role is taken for instance by school teachers or pupils who were targeted specifically with the hiking exhibition or by politicians who show a strong affiliation to the project.
- Likewise, in the Biovallee, politicians, parents' associations and school and canteen staff for the public organic food procurement program become ambassadors through sensitization. Again the word of mouth is the most important communication format (The Biovallee brand management association developed mostly thanks to the word-of-mouth).
- Upplandsbondens (UB) is a last example that shows how important food ambassadors are (respectively, which negative effects it can have not to have them). Due to the lack of food ambassadors the products are not marketed under their brand by the downstream retail/wholesale partner (A&T). The deal was that A&T would take care of the marketing and selling of UB branded products (and thus to boost them regionally and/or in fairs, markets etc.). But since the cooperation has not taken off properly yet and since there seems to be a general lack of trust in their relationship at the moment, there is currently no one really promoting the UB branded products. When the brand is not visible anywhere (except in the shops able to cut and package themselves) the potential ambassadors disappear as they cannot speak for products that do not exist. Therefore, UB itself has only limited contact to its customers since they do not have the marketing funds any longer and since they thought A&T would take on this task. As of now, it works a bit ad hoc and depends whether UB has the time and resources to do something. The potential however would be large. There are restaurants that use UB meat and would be happy to display it more. There are also committed retail shop owners who would boost the UB brand if provided with products and information material (so if they would get more background knowledge or be trained on UB products and what's behind the brand). And there are consumers who look for the UB meat, but have trouble finding it in their shops. In fact, only when UB member farmers visit shops to display and demonstrate their meat and the occasions UB members sell meat at markets are the only practical examples of food ambassadorship at the moment (and - due to lack of resources- these occasions are rare this and next year).



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6.3 Social Media use:

The use of social media and web-based communication tools in general depends also on their popularity and also availability to access them in the respective countries. For instance in Lithuania, most of the elderly people are used to shop in regional small stores and electronic communication means are thus - in the opinion of an interviewed sales assistants of one of these small shops – not popular enough yet among them. Also in Turkey the internet is still not as widespread especially in rural areas where consumers do not use them to the same extent as in Western Europe. Besides, the use of social media also depends on the willingness of the management to make use of it. In this respect, an interviewee of the Bohlsener Mühle states: *"Most employees in leading positions are older than the typical Facebook generation. We haven't started to work with it. It is not our hobby"*. Since Bohlsener Mühle is not yet using social media for consumer communication, this would definitely be an area to get involved. However, this would require a lot of additional work time and engagement of a staff member. Currently, the head of the PR division has not had the opportunity to get involved in social media activities such as Facebook but she thinks it would be time for Bohlsener Mühle to be present. How the other investigated cases deal with social media is described in the following:

- Upplandsbondens (UB) has a Facebook account for promoting fairs, new products and cooperation etc. They have around 400 followers (349 likes by December 2014) and once in a while consumers ask for contact details where to purchase their meat. In the newsfeed, UB presents pictures and short texts about recent activities (like markets, occasions where they have offered their meat, etc.) and also provides links to newspaper articles dealing with organic/high-quality food in some way. Both, the home page and the Facebook account - according to an interviewee - would need more attention from UB. A rather unique aspect is that UB offered a mini-course on how to make use of social media to their member farmers during spring 2015 (it is unclear however how well it was received). Besides, there are short clips on you tube featuring member farmers of UB, but these have not been produced by UB themselves, but by the regional branch of the Swedish Farmer Association (LRF). The films encouraged consumers to go and visit a farm, but they are not online anymore and therefore appear to not be really relevant.
- Landwege members and non-members can find information and can connect with each other on Facebook. The emphasized advantages of social media platforms named are, that as most members represent more the typically elderly organic generations, it is seen as a chance to get in contact with the younger generation of customers, to demonstrate that "we are up-to-date" instead of being only the 'old-fashioned organic guys' ('Ökos') and that "we open for new ideas and new ways of communication". The mentioned controversies with social media refer to the fact that it is rather time consuming to properly maintain such an account (including e.g. answering, commenting, posting, discussing etc.)
- Gram Slot is very active on Facebook, they post on an almost daily basis since spring 2014. These posts usually consist of a small number of photographs followed by a short text commenting on the pictures. The posts typically refer to events that took place at Gram Slot both in terms of leisure and in terms of cultural events. In terms of communication methods Facebook serves both as an advertising platform but also as a platform of communication (debates going on regarding recent events, criticism plus defending statements. Even vacancy positions are posted on their page (i.e. one of these posts received 139 shares, plus numerous people were tagged, which results in an enormous outreach). The use of Facebook resembles a deliberate communication strategy employed by Gram



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Slot. Instead of following a strategy of publicity based on advertisement, Gram slot has followed a much more interactive strategy replacing traditional advertising with a strategy that focusses on supporting various communications about Gram Slot.

- Members of the Danish Food Communities communicate quite frequently via social media such as Facebook or the website, which is powered by Wordpress. One of the Aarhus activists even described the community in Aarhus in slightly ironic terms as a “Facebook community”, indicating that the primary social integration in his opinion took place via social media (In terms of connecting the consumer activists with each other, the potential of social media has been utilized to a large degree). Two of the members of the board of the Aarhus food community emphasized that social media was a very important ingredient in the process of recruiting interested consumers in the initial phase as it enabled a rapid spread of the initiative). Both chairs from the Aarhus community put great emphasis on maintaining a continuous flow of information among the members via social media. The website, as well as the Facebook group, constitute the primary interface between the individual members and the various activity groups of the Food Communities. In terms of establishing internal coherence among the activists, social media is an important “glue” for the food communities, as social media is the primary meeting space for the activists. Another aspect was the role of the Wiki supplied by the Copenhagen food community. Among many other resources, the Wiki contains a startup kit for new food communities, which was instrumental for the activists in Aarhus in the startup process. The startup process for the activists in Aarhus did also include personal contacts and face-to-face guidance with activists from Copenhagen, who functioned as ‘founding fathers’ for the Aarhus activists. The food communities have been concerned with presenting the farmers via their website and via Facebook, thus allowing the farmer to assume a distinct identity in relation to the members of the community. In Aarhus, they put a distinct emphasis on the farmers’ account of why they converted to organic. In dramaturgical terms, they were very concerned about staging a certain image of the farmer – in this case a person devoted to organic farming, following personal motivations and beliefs. Within the food community in Aarhus, some of the activists had expressed their interest in doing further interviews with the main supplier and to produce video introductions to the farm. Some of the activists had a keen interest in web-based video production and saw this as an appropriate way of communicating principles of organic farming. However, this project has yet to be actualized.
- ‘Bio vom Berg’ farmers are indirectly put in touch with the consumers by the cooperative who promotes them (apart from the brochures and leaflets) as well in the internet (especially via Facebook, but also on their webpage) and farmers and food related stuff get promoted in order to inform and raise the consumer awareness. On the Facebook page they inform about processing steps, traditional processing techniques, show pictures of the production sites and inform about upcoming events, activities they are involved in or post links to respective articles.
- Kolonihagen uses Facebook for communicating with customers where they have more than 10.000 likes. Kolonihagen has no marketing budget (ann.: Facebook is thus seen as a cheap alternative). They experience these channels to be suitable to communicate towards customers. To them it is important that they communicate in a way that is honest, open and trustworthy and in a way that personal answers are given on questions. It is also important that customers are honest and confident to ask questions and give comments/input. According to an employee, Kolonihagen experiences customers to be increasingly active in social media.



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- Røros dairy makes use of Facebook and twitter, where they mainly get positive comments. On Facebook, which seems to be used most at the moment, Røros dairy informs about happenings, festivals, meetings, new packaging or about developments in organic agriculture, news about organic agriculture from the government and research, but also give tips for recipes on using their products. Additionally, a lot of information is about new products, their profile, on new equipment or their customers. For example, when their customer St. Olavs hospital won the organic food price in 2014, it was published on twitter and Facebook. Or when Gordon Ramsey, the famous TV-chef from England visited Norway and referred to products from Røros dairy, which a restaurant he visited had used, or when a local producer started to use the dairies' products in ice-cream, this was referred to also in social media. Also upcoming events are announced, like when visitors can come to the dairy or when there was a meeting for example with the Minister of Agriculture and Food. Regarding the feedback via the social media channels, people mainly respond very positive on products or likewise also share recipes where Røros products are included. Communication with consumers via social media (6872 likes on Facebook; 841 followers on twitter; 12.11.2014), is perceived as very important and this communication has grown much the last years. Customers ask all kinds of questions; about products, about organic production, about processing. Most consumers recommend their products and brag very much of their products. Complaints are taken very serious, and the dairy gives new products if consumers are not satisfied.
- Ekodar and Planika do make use of Facebook/Youtube to promote their products and give some more insights into production and about the history etc. or to (like claimed in the Ekodar case) to gain feedback and to forward the remarks and critics from consumers made on Facebook via e-mail to the cooperative and its members.
- Biocoop has TV spots which have several hundred thousand views on youtube and also uses Facebook and other social media.
- Ekolådan does use Facebook, Bio Sunder is also present on Facebook and in other social media (Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn) but they all do not provide any further information on its use and do not specify in how far, for which purposes and how successful the communication is.
- Biovallee has 14 videos posted on Youtube and also operates a Facebook page.
- Achleitner reported of a facebook group created independently by some customers on their own to exchange about their experiences with the boxes. The managing director used this to invite them to a farm excursion tour and a lunch at the company's restaurant ('Kulinarium') afterwards. This can serve as an example how communication via social media finally resulted in educating customers as food ambassadors.



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7. Discussion

Regarding the general findings, we have heard that when enterprises grow and volumes increase, communication processes become more routinized and formalized. Though factual knowledge can be provided via these forms of communication (e.g. internally concerning requirements, prices, amounts etc. and externally on production methods or traceability), it cannot substitute the trust building and identity formation provided by personal relationship. Trust and identification are however crucial, especially for the transmission of intangible values inherent to products and relationships along the chain.

Moreover, for formal as well as for informal communication, the cases show that there is an asymmetry in the communication of facts as well as values. Most of the examples of communication are directed towards consumers or target B2B relationships and are not directed towards primary producers.

Although all interview partners praise the positive relationship, often the communication is restricted to the next partner in the chain. The identification of primary producers with the values mediated through the entire chain would be particularly necessary in many instances in order to maintain decisive quality features (meaning that due the strong identification, the producers have an inherent self-interest in maintaining highest quality features). So there is somehow a blind spot when it comes to integrating also producers in the discussions and fostering exchange between them. Moreover, when considering that with growth also the number of primary producers to be integrated into the chain increases, it becomes particularly important to familiarize the new entrants with the core values of the chain. Partly, this can be solved by organizational methods like the formation of regional producer groups which may develop bonding social capital through internal meetings and coordination and which subsequently take representative roles and function like contact points (or food ambassadors) towards the 'outside'.

However, at the same time it is necessary to also provide meeting possibilities with other groups (horizontally on the same level but also vertically along the chain) to increase knowledge and mutual understanding of the various conditions. This has to do with the fact that virtues like solidarity and loyalty, which build on commonly shared values or certain product qualities, are very hard to mediate via formalized mass media communication channels. This leads to the necessity of providing informal meeting spaces where such values can be exchanged. These may be encounters connected to conferences, courses and other formal arrangements, but essentially they work through personal two way communication and discussion. This is where the role of food ambassadors comes in. Similarly to representatives of producer groups, food ambassadors are as well some form of interconnecting spot who communicate information and mediate values and who typically operate outside standard formalized media channels. They have the best effect if they are not associated with business activities, but may display their personal conviction of values and qualities.

Food ambassadors can vary, depending on which specific target group is addressed. For instance, the deeper the discussions are going, the more know-how is needed/required (from the side of the ambassador but also from the side of the consumer) and the food ambassador needs to be adequately trained and equipped with the respective background knowledge. In turn, the more critical and information seeking consumers are, the more they are again likely to become good food ambassadors themselves. So there are different kinds of food ambassadors, those who have only limited background knowledge and those who are able convey also highly complex values. Ideally, a food ambassador is able to transmit all the values that the food chain comprises, but in reality different food ambassadors might be able to convey different values. If a value needs a lot of background knowledge, for instance



regarding traditional processing techniques in cheese making, it might be better to have a ‘professional’ ambassador like a cheese processor to convey this value. Whereas for instance, when it is about estimating in how far relationships between actors along the chain are fair and equal, the chairman of a cooperative might be more credible to convey such a value. Generally, the ability of a food ambassador to mediate values strongly depends on where their particular knowledge is located, what their profession is, or what they have been trained in or shown at a fair or during an excursion. For example, if an ambassador had been told by farmers during farm visits, that they get a fair price, this might subsequently be a value that is comparably easier to credibly convey (even by more ‘superficial’ food ambassadors like advertisement testimonials) than ethical and social standards, or compliance with environmental protection or animal welfare standards. This would demand more profound background knowledge. Therefore, values like tradition, solidarity, closeness or trust are values that are rather nebulous, hard to define exactly and thus more superficial and easier to argue or mediate also by ‘new/lay/rookie’ food ambassadors, whereas complicated processing techniques that have to do with the composition of the raw material for instance, demand another stock of knowledge. Another problem with food ambassadorship is that it is hard to measure whether all stakeholders involved along the food chain accept the ambassador as someone to take the role of a representative mediator for them. The chance that this is the case is, as we would like to argue, higher during informal meeting spaces. In fact these are also the occasions where (in most of the cases) people become or get assigned or educated being food ambassadors. Informal meeting spaces and food ambassadors are thus two aspects that are closely interlinked, as the latter are usually equipped with knowledge during face-to-face discussions, personal talks etc. that typically (though not exclusively) have the character of an informal exchange. Hence, we want to say some more words about this distinct communication format and why we consider it being so central. Informal meeting spaces are important as they are fundamentally different from what Kastberg (2015) meant with linear communication formats, because *“in the [...] case of a lecture, for instance, everything said may have been heard, understood, accepted, and subsequently complied with, but then again it may not. However, when it comes to an interactive instance of organic food communication, the knowledge deposit can, if not measured in any positivistic sense, at least be appreciated on the basis of the interaction itself, e.g., on the number and relevance of questions, of critical remarks put forward by an audience, etc.”* (Kastberg, 2015:2). The proximity, or even intimacy so to speak, that can be experienced at such occasions, be it cooking meals together, joining an excursion or to simply discuss together at a farmers market where a demonstration takes place, *“allows an audience to give instantaneous feedback in the form of questions and comments, and of handling the props and instruments involved in the process”* (Kastberg, 2015:3). However, to merely create/provide such spaces is not sufficient, without taking into consideration what the limitations and possibilities are. For instance at a farmers market event, farmers are there to sell their produce and do probably not have enough time to engage in deep discussion with interested consumer, which however would be necessary to provide them with a profound and detailed feedback. But the feedback and the farmers’ response to that, provides consumers with more insights, making them become potential food ambassadors. This underpins that informal meeting spaces and food ambassadors are strongly interlinked, as in the end, informal meeting spaces (of which farmers do not necessarily have to be part of, but can be substituted by another food ambassador) display the best communication format to train, recruit or educate other food ambassadors. They are likewise also one of the most suitable formats for giving/exchanging qualitative and profound feedback, although, according to Kastberg (2015), we would need to distinguish between interactional processes and co-actional processes. In contrast to the ‘mere’ interactional processes, *“the deposit emerging from a co-actional instance of organic food communication, [...] is*



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gaugeable on the basis of the cooperative activity itself, i.e., the deposit is what the participants in the communication activity themselves negotiate, what they are able to co-construct.” (Kastberg, 2015:2) Coaction thus goes even further than interactional communication. So even if informal meeting spaces like excursions or farmers markets do spur an interactional relationship, they do not spur a reciprocal one. This means that “the point of departure for interactive communication still positions the expert, e.g., the farmer, the chef, or the like, as ‘sender’ and the average consumer, typically a non-expert when it comes to organic products and processes, as the ‘receiver.’ This, in turn, means that the point of reference, the endpoint of interactive communication, is the expert’s knowledge; and not so much what the receiver may bring to qualify this knowledge. In other words, the absolutism of expertise and the absolutism of the position that holds it are not questioned, and in that respect, interaction resembles transmission. In communication theoretical vocabulary: even if participants are invited to react, they are neither encouraged nor expected to co-act. And it is primarily in this respect that interaction differs radically from coaction. [...] The organic communication activities which I label co-actional are [...] quite different. [...] The core activity is the co-actional communication process itself [and] ... the roles of actor and audience, of sender and receiver, become interchangeable under the common denominator ‘participants’ [...]” (Kastberg, 2015:3).

So, the informal meeting spaces we speak of do usually rather fall in the category of interactional communication formats. Still, it is crucial to think about how to set up and design them in a way that an exchange actually happens and consumer really give feedback to farmers and can talk about mutual values. As a last point in this respect we'd like to mention that of course the necessity for profound feedback and discussion varies depending on the kind of value and some might be more conflicting than others. Subsequently, the composition or set-up of informal meeting spaces may influence which values are getting discussed and which not, which means on the other hand the format of informal meeting spaces determines in a way which values are able to get transmitted. The example of Upplandsbondens underpins, that conveying knowledge, which is related to environmental values, like energy solutions regarding biomass heating, how to make use of solar cells, or low stress stock handling, is most comprehensively conveyed during physical meetings, like farm visits or when things are demonstrated and applied directly in practice during an excursion.

A last aspect we want to highlight in this section is social media, which are somehow a virtual informal meeting space. Again, also Kastberg (2015) concludes that “*the so-called new medias offer ample possibilities for both interactional and co-actional communication.*” Social media platforms like Facebook or twitter allow all stakeholders to post texts, images, videos, to comment on postings from others out of which content is allowed to be co-constructed by all. However, it has to be taken into account that - like Diethelm and MacKee (2009) argue - “[...] there is no guarantee that (all) stakeholders are willing or able to participate. From the point of view of the consumer, for instance, a sprouting denialism, a growing decision fatigue among citizens of industrialized societies, and, generally speaking, information overload, as well as the consumer’s should be considered.” Moreover, as Caswell and Mojdziszka (1996) recall, the “relative transaction costs for becoming informed” are sometimes also a hindering factor.



8. Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, we propose the following conclusions and recommendations:

8.1 Conclusions based on the general findings:

- The national (agricultural as well as non-agricultural, technological, societal etc.) context may influence the configurations and possibilities of communication just as well as supply chain characteristics (organizational structures, added-values, product types or packaging etc.).
- Moreover, product type, organizational structure or growth processes effect or even determine the form or type of communication.
- Marketing tools like newsletters, homepages are rather a one way communication formats and do not give any indication whether the recipient has received the message. They need to be supplemented by two way communication tools in order to provide feedback loops from consumers to primary producers, foster producer identity with their product and allow consumer trust.
- Within the reports, we found numerous efforts which are particularly designed for consumers to foster identification and trust throughout informal meetings and which thus appear as a kind of a marketing strategy. However, we found that less efforts towards integration and identification of primary producers. There is a general lack of communication to foster producer identity with the final product in indirect marketing chains.
- Concerning internal communication processes, we saw that the formation of regional producer groups with representatives strengthens bonding social capital and improves coordination.
- However, especially informal ways of communication on the side of the producers (i.e. by forming regional producer groups with representatives) may not only increase their identification with the value chain, but also induce new ideas for innovations regarding product development as well as marketing. Especially informal meeting spaces among farmers and between farmers and their downstream partners may be essential in this respect.

8.2 Recommendations for stakeholders:

In general informal meeting spaces, food ambassadors and social media are already used. However they lack a strategic planning and positioning. We recommend therefor to include them more systematically in the communication strategies, internally as well as externally.

- SET UP SUITABLE INFORMAL MEETING SPACES

Regarding the provision of informal meeting spaces, we saw that many cases install for instance farmers market events, do tastings at the point of sale or organize some on-farm festivities where producers and consumer can meet. Best-practise examples are for instance the monthly cooking evenings at the Bohlsener Mühle, the yearly farmers market in the case of "BIO vom BERG", the numerous cultural and



leisure-time activities taking place in Gram Slot or the Danish Food Communities who even meet on a weekly basis.

Besides informal spaces where consumers may meet producers, such arrangements are important also among and between supply chain actor groups. An informal exchange may of course also take place in connection to conferences, courses and other formal arrangements like excursions of primary producers to processors. Anyway, such communication formats are important as they enable interactions. It has to be kept in mind however, that the configuration of informal meeting spaces may have an influence on [1] which values can be mediated and [2] in how far food ambassadorship can be trained (see more in chapter 7).

- **INSTALL AND TRAIN FOOD AMBASSADORS**

Some cases managed quite successfully to actively educate or train food ambassadors. For instance, it seems as a promising way to incentivize consumers to form special interest groups (see the Facebook group in the case of Biohof Achleitner) or to organize an on-farm internship for shop assistants (e.g. in the case of Landwege) in order to increase their identification and knowledge, making them become potential food ambassadors. In a somewhat different way, the Danish Food Communities internally train or incentivize food ambassadorship by extensively providing and sharing information and discussing on Facebook or on Wiki. The consumers participating in such activities display usually a high credibility and can function as real producer representatives. Further good examples are the cases of Ekolådan who have guest writers like journalists and others giving input to their newsletter and Røros who have well known cooks using their products in TV programs.

- **INCREASE SOCIAL MEDIA APPEARANCE**

More (or at least adequate) efforts need to be invested in setting up and maintaining (administration, support etc.) a social media appearance. Quite a few cases report that they see of course the necessity, but lack the resources which such an activity demands (see Bohlsener Mühle where a new employee would be needed to care about social media presence of the business). However, our analysis shows that such channels obviously offer a strong potential for easy feedback loops, can mediate a magnitude of values and can be used for a wide array of topics apart from mere web-based marketing activity. Furthermore, by training farmers on the use of social media like Facebook and integrating/interlinking them on such platforms, the gap between producers and consumers could be closed again to some extent, enabling even direct communication processes between them on such platforms. Apart from social media, there are of course also further possibilities like the QR-code like in the Slovenian Ekodar case to directly connect consumers and producers, supporting the feeling of trust.

8.3 Recommendations for policy:

Generally our recommendations listed below mainly derive from deficits or wishes observed or stated in the case study reports and less from best practices. For example, policy could support or incentivize – be it financially or in any other form – the creation of informal meeting spaces where food ambassadorship is ideally established and food ambassadors may receive further formation and training.

Other measures that would help medium sized organic food chains when it comes to maintain good communication are the following:



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- PROVIDE INITIAL GRANTS FOR STAFF COSTS TO IMPLEMENT NEW COMMUNICATION METHODS.

When introducing new communication methods it is important that on an internal level, employees of an enterprise and other actors along the supply chain need training and support in how to best make use of innovative communication tools (e.g. to present themselves on social media, to use blogs etc.). As an example, the Swedish Upplandsbondens case offered courses on social media use to farmers. Such trainings should be offered also in the frame public advisory services.

- CONNECT THE USE OF NEW COMMUNICATION METHODS WITH PUBLIC SUPPORT PROGRAMS.

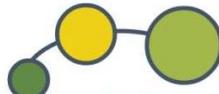
Social media can for instance take the role of virtual informal meeting spaces, allowing stakeholders to connect and exchange horizontally within for instance producer groups as well as to mediate values and receive feedback from others vertically, be it on an internal level from other stakeholders along the chain or on an external level from consumers. Public support programs could include the mandatory installation and use of such communication efforts.

- INTEGRATE FOOD AMBASSDORS IN SCHOOLS

On an external level, a supportive measure regarding communication would be to integrate food ambassadors in schools (i.e. in form of food lectures in the curricula). In general, it is critical to apply different methods and tools for educating actors along the food chains in order to become more value based. Educating consumer on values of course goes beyond supporting respective communication along the supply chain, because well-educated consumers can make profound and informed decisions on the sustainability impact of their buying behavior, which is in the general interest of society.

- INSTALL AN INSTITIONALIZED MEDIATOR IN CASE OF CONTROVIERSIES

In case of controversies, misunderstandings or lack of trust between partners along the supply chain, it can be useful to have the option to resort to an ombudsman as an institutionalized mediator. Values based supply chain depend on valid relationships between actors allowing a balanced long term sharing of interests and distribution of benefits. If healthy relationships are damaged between these actors, the chains' competitiveness could be endangered. Slovenian policy makers highlighted this, proposing ombudsmen responsible for implementing payment discipline and for respecting payment deadlines, two bottlenecks crucial in Slovenia's agro-food chains.



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Annex

Glossary list & definitions for the Healthy Growth project:

Healthy growth in values-based organic food supply chains

A food supply chain - is a network of food-related business enterprises through which products move from production through consumption, including pre-production and post-consumption activities. Typically links in the supply chain are: Input provider → producer → processor → distributor → wholesaler → retailer → consumer

Mid-scale chains- in the Healthy Growth project we have defined this to be chains that:

- handle differentiated food products of a certain volume
- involve several farmers/producers and where communication is mainly indirect between producer/farmer and consumer
- involve at least one separate actor as an intermediary between producer and consumer
- involve a minimum of one stage of product transformation (packaging, processing etc.) and therefore two steps of transmission (farmer - intermediary actor/initiative - consumer)
- consist of actors and initiatives such as food businesses, retailers, associations, networks or other initiatives/organizations

“Mid-scale” mean that the chain handles larger volume than volume passing from direct sale (small scale) but less volume than passing a conventional chain (large scale).

Values-based is used to characterize food products with added values and the nature of certain business relationships among interacting food business enterprises. When these relationships are expressly based in an articulated set of values across the supply chain, they are becoming known as values-based supply chains.

Product qualities - In mid-scale values-based chains product qualities in focus are usually qualities distinguishing from conventional products and product qualities that go beyond organic products . Product qualities may be grouped as geographical proximity, social and ethical concerns, environmental concerns, special product features and concerns for regional sustainable development, but there may be additional qualities not covered by these headings. Qualities of products are usually closely connected to basis values in the values-based chain.

Differentiation: the real or illusory distinction between competing products in a market. In mid-scale values-based organic supply chains products are usually distinguished from conventional products in several ways but they are also different from mainstream organic products in going beyond organic qualities. We also talk about differentiation between food supply chains, where mid-scale values-based chains differentiates from conventional and mainstream organic chains.

Differentiation strategy: to create and market unique products for varied customer groups. Aim to create a superior fulfillment of customer needs in one or several product attributes in order to develop customer satisfaction and loyalty, which can be used to charge a premium price for products. Such a strategy aims at reducing the price sensitivity of consumers by offering uniqueness.

Value-added - is used to characterize food products that are converted from raw state through processing that gives the resulting product an incremental value in the market place. An incremental value is realized from either higher price or expanded market. **Value-added** - is also used to characterize food products that gain incremental value in the marketplace through differentiation from similar products based on attributes such as geographical location, environmental stewardship, food safety or functionality, etc. Examples are locally grown products, specialty products, and organic products



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Growth - in mid-scale values-based chains: National reports shows that the way growth is measured/mentioned depends upon which type of mid-scale values-based chain that is studied and actors in focus. Examples of definitions are:

- ✓ turnover per year
- ✓ number / volumes sold
- ✓ number of full-time employees
- ✓ numbers of farmers/producers
- ✓ number of organic shops opened
- ✓ numbers of marketed products
- ✓ number of animals handled by the chain
- ✓ number of groups of producers and consumers
- ✓ numbers of "secondary" products
- ✓ increasing acreage under organic cultivation
- ✓ number of box schemes per week
- ✓ growth in consumer demand
- ✓ number of supermarkets proposing a brand

It may be important to notice that diversification is a growth strategy, i.e. that new values-based chains are established by the actor. We can see that box schemes for example in some cases diversify in establishing internet sale, own shops, restaurants etc. These represent growth strategies which make it possible to reach new customer groups inside a geographical area or outside. Diversifying within a geographic area is quite usual in many of the successful chains reviewed. Another aspect to be taken into account is to differentiate between additive growth (growth per unit – meaning that single farms or enterprises grow) and multiplicative growth (the network of partners/farms gets bigger).

Healthy Growth: growth in organic values-based chains where the organic values are secured and/or advanced during the growth process (according to project proposal)

Communication: a process in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach mutual understanding. In the Healthy growth project we are mainly focusing on communicating of values/qualities of products along the supply chain.

Trust: reliance on the integrity, ability, or character of a person or thing. In our case focus is mainly on trust between actors in the mid-scale values-based chain, where trust is a result of communication and cooperation between actors along the chain.

Risk: The possibility of suffering harm or loss; danger. In our case risk is connected to growth and change in a mid-scale values-based chain. There are for example a risk/possibility to loose or weaken established qualities in such processes, reduce trust among chain actors, increase costs and thus reduce economic performance, not manage to handle loans, and in the worst case get bankrupt.

Integrity: uncompromising adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty. In our project integrity is mainly related to organic values, but also other values which the mid-scale values-based food supply chain is based upon.