

Entwurf:  
Documentation of the  
**Dialogue of Social Solidary Economies and  
Cooperatives in Europe**  
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## **Introduction**

From May 7-9, 2021, the digital Colloquium “Social Solidarity Economies and Cooperatives in Europe. East-West and West-East Dialogue” took place, an event jointly organized by the Adam-von-Trott-Foundation, the „Verein zur Förderung der Solidarischen Ökonomie e.V.“ and the University of Göttingen.

The aim of the Colloquium is to connect actors of Social Solidarity Economies by sharing concepts and projects and establishing an exchange of knowledge and experience between western and eastern Europe. Actors from a broad spectrum of backgrounds are invited to share their ideas and projects concerning solidarity-based economy, ranging from small, hyperlocal communities to bigger transcontinental concepts.

The event was organized mostly in panel discussions; these will be documented in the following paper.

## **Panel 0 – Where do we want to go? Concrete utopia from actors of transformation.**

The first panel of the conference was opened by an input from Clarita Müller-Plantenberg from the „Verein zur Förderung der Solidarischen Ökonomie“. Following the theme of the Panel, Clarita defines the underlying utopia of social-solidarity economy (SSE) as meeting the various regional challenges that are specific to every project. Only if these challenges are overcome, national movements can grow strong enough to cross borders and become international. This international, border-crossing movement is the ultimate utopia.

Clarita continued the input by showcasing different examples of SSE in different phases of transformation. She talked about the National Brazilian Forum of SE, which originated from regional initiatives and has become a political power in the country and has in turn spawned even more movements focused on SSE all across Brazil. These include farmer unions, movements of fair employment, community banks and two large networks of university incubators with over 100 participating universities. SSE actors organized themselves in a national SE congress. Regional solutions to challenges were brought forward in this congress by the elected regional delegates. Indigenous

groups were also included in these conferences, adding valuable insight about ancient concepts for life in harmony with nature and reciprocity in the community.

Additionally, Clarita presented the efforts of workers in Chicago which organized worker buyouts of failing enterprises, incorporating their communities in managing and training. A polytechnical academy was founded to train students from Black and Latino communities for the highly technical manufacturing processes. These worker buyouts have also happened in Europe, especially in Italy and France. Regional SSE projects are also found all over Europe, stemming from farmers or textile workers.

Finally, Clarita pledges SSE utopia from an internationalist point of view: we are all together on one planet, we have to work together to protect it and the humans living on it.

Next up were Péter Reveland from the Gólya project and Zsuzsa Mészáros of the Kunbábony Ten Community Cooperative. These two projects from Hungary are both communities that live together following the principles of SSE.

Zsuzsa showcased the Kunbábony Ten Community Cooperative as a SSE community that has been in existence since 2011 with the goal of promoting a solidary community through providing meaningful jobs for its members that benefit the community. An important focus of the Kunbábony project is living in harmony with nature and giving back its fruits to society, for example by maintaining a large vegetable garden and producing food locally. An additional aspect of Kunbábony is the extensive training that takes place there. The annual Summer Academy in Kunbábony is a forum within the project and with other projects to share knowledge and experiences. Zsuzsa stressed that the feeling of community can be relayed and transported to other communities. Thus, new regional projects can be inspired by the exchange.

Following Zsuzsa's input, Péter shared information about the Gólya cooperative in Budapest, Hungary. The initiative started off as a regular enterprise in form of a Café in 2012. However, because of the underlying principles of a society based on siblinghood and sharing of economic responsibilities and burdens, it quickly became a lot more than a Café. At the moment, the cooperative has about 15 active members who have mutual ownership of the Café turned pub and a community house. Gólya aims to provide a place to share visions about SSE, a hub for solidaric economy so to say. Péter layed out the goals of Gólya as teaching members to autonomously acquire and create knowledge for the community and providing for needs such as nutrition and education

from inside the community. They want to shift perception of labour as an alienated burden towards seeing it as a force of creation. Therefore, invested labour is a requirement for becoming a member and the shares of profit are based on the invested labour.

Péter described the ultimate goal as aiding in creating similar initiatives and cooperating with similar organizations and communities.

**Karolina Babič and Lina Habjanič talked about the problems, solutions, and future perspectives in the SSE from a Slovenian Perspective.**

Karolina Babič is an early member of the “CAAP”, the Center for alternative and autonomous production founded in 2011 and based in the city of Maribor, Slovenia. She described the “CAAP” as an organization with the primary aim to support SSE cooperatives in different stages of development all over Slovenia from the process of founding to the support of new innovative ideas. The advocative work is also an important element of the non-government organization.

Referring to the Name of the Panel Karolina came up with the sentence “The word (Utopia) gives a lot of hope but also a lot of responsibility” which pointed out a strongly challenging situation and raised the question; How is the current situation for the Social Solidary Economy in Slovenia?

Mentioning the 150 years long history of social cooperatives in her country, she talked about three times of a strong growth of cooperative movements. These movements were always stopped and dismantled by different forces. She continued that Slovenia is facing a new founding wave of cooperative and social enterprises, based on membership. She described an omnipresent motivation and enthusiasm to reach social, communal, and environmental goals.

According to Karolina, the idea of SSE faces different structural problems. The access to the common marked is tough, economical pressure forces the cooperatives to give up their business goals. Sometimes people tend to give up the concept of the cooperative economization. Slovenia established a new law for cooperatives and SSE in 2012.

But she described the “CAAP” as an important actor to enable a constant growth in the SSE sector. Centered is the idea of the “democratic control principle” which basically means an organizational form of one vote for every cooperative member. Moreover, the organization aims for further education in the topics of common property,

innovative practices, and products. With the idea to convince more policy makers from the idea of the Social Solidary Economy.

Lina Habjanič talked about the cooperative “konopko”, a seven-year-old organization with the aim to organize hemp growing and processing in Slovenia. “konopko” helps to establish essential connections between grower, processor, and consumer. The founding process took six months and the “CAAP” was a helpful partner in this process. But the creating process of memberships and the evaluation of right values continues. According to Lina “konopko” tries to accumulate the best things from the past and present. The cooperative works with two statuses of memberships. Everyone starts with a joint membership; a person who wants to become full member will have to go through an educational process. Knowledge about the structure of cooperatives and social enterprises is obligatory. The actual number of members is around 150, the cooperative already enables two full time jobs.

Furthermore, Lina talked about the problems the cooperative is facing. Such as the high pressure from the market to the producers, to higher the revenue of production that seems like an unavoidable act. In the past, cooperatives turned into stakeholder companies, also “konopko” was close to this point. People tried to become the direction giving force in the cooperative to turn it into a capitalistic stakeholder economy. Furthermore, in the past decade the hemp production in Slovenia has grown rapidly but since 2018 the number of producers is declining. Another actual problem mentioned by Lina is that policy makers are getting involved. The establishing of new seals for hemp, predominant in the east of Slovenia seems to be a sign that private stakeholder companies could enter the market. The cooperatives would not be competitive nowadays and must improve their structures.

The cooperation has impressive future goals. Structural problems in the agrarian sector are similar all over Slovenia. With an ongoing establishment of the SSE, Slovenian producers could higher their standards of living, nowadays many farmers are still not paid properly. Lina formulated her hope that an emerging hemp production can contribute to a better soil quality, but this is a long-time perspective. She added that in future the legalization will be more supportive for the social organized hemp industry. Also, the market for medical hemp seems to emerge all around Europe. She hopes for more support from regional and national municipalities and private stakeholders. In conclusion she said, “Right now If we open one door, two

doors are getting closed behind us” for her it is hard to say something about the utopian future of the SSE because it’s more a dystopian future in Slovenia: “We hope for a 180.”

**Gunter Kramp lectured for the “Ackersyndicat”.** The “embryo” or sister organization of the “Mietshäusersyndicat”, a decentralized housing cooperative with more than 160 housing projects. With the concern to create and organize new land of commune within the capitalist driven economy. Gunter focused his impressive speech on the chances and the necessity of a reform of private property in the agrarian sector. According to Gunter the importance of a sustainable agriculture is often denied. But it must be mentioned that this basic economy keeps us all alive. Furthermore, he pointed out that the global pandemic with closed borders and within interrupted distribution channels showed how fragile our system of global food supply is.

He describes the forgotten link between the climate crisis and the food industry as devastating. According to him 50% of the worldwide CO<sup>2</sup> emissions are produced in the industrial sector of food production. The main problems are the transportation and packaging. The process of industrial agriculture itself based on irresponsible process of farmland extraction through the destruction of rainforests was also mentioned as a main problem. Additional 25 to 40% of the emitted CO<sup>2</sup> comes from soil degradation.

As solution Gunter described a utopian idea of localized, regenerative and civil controlled agriculture. With a strong attitude he explained that it can provide food sovereignty and security also in global crisis of the capitalistic system. This should abolish the destructive nature in the worldwide agrarian sector with exploitative loans and inhuman working conditions. Both urban and rural areas must be integrated in the process of production. Establishing a worldwide regenerative agriculture can compensate 20% of the CO<sup>2</sup> emissions by the carbon capture of the plants. To reach the goal he said in future we should reach the point that people take the land from capitalist enclosure and produce in common. For example, a European solution would be the establishment of a legitimization of the property of commons. Furthermore, he said there was a time without private property, there are already movements all around the world, but in Europe the establishing of such idea is harder because of the long history of the capitalistic concept of private landownership.

## **Panel 1: Hungary-Northern Hestia: Our houses in our territories are our potentials**

### *I.L.A.*

The I.L.A is a get-together for both academics and activist, who share the idea of shaping today's economy in a more solidaric way with the main goal to identify ways and strategies with which the transition to a social-ecological mode of production can be accomplished and encouraged within today's economy. In order to achieve said goals, workshops are being held to promote discussions between academics and activists, who are trying to transfer their projects into practice.

### *Fuchsmühle*

The Fuchsmühle is an organization of young individuals who are trying to live together in a way they would wish the whole world would be living. They live together in a community on an old farm in Witzenhausen in Northern Hestia consisting of a windmill, a house, a barn and a garden. economical, ecological, social and cultural factors are the center points of the transformation to a social way of living, showcasing how a self-organized, inclusive and democratic way of living together can be achieved. The Fuchsmühle is mainly financed via members of their cooperative, the cooperative members do not have to live in the Fuchsmühle collective.

### *Golya*

Golya is a house with a bar that promotes a solidaric way of living with one another. Their goal is to establish a lifestyle in which no member of their house must suffer from some form of discrimination or disadvantages, promoting an equality within the members of the house. Another plan of Golya is to establish a way to transfer knowledge about those principles to upcoming generations. Responsibility in all parts of life is what Golya see as most important. One should not focus solely on economic growth, but also turn their focus towards ecological and social realities.

### *Stiftung Adam von Trott*

The Stiftung Adam von Trott was founded in 1986 in memoriam of Adam von Trott, a famous resistance fighter during the Nazi Rule in Germany who was killed by the fascist government while imprisoned in Berlin in 1944. To honour his legacy, the foundation



is establishing a „centre for democracy“, which tries to encourage people to take a stance for human rights in today's time. The foundation uses various means of connecting actors and sharing knowledge and experiences such as conferences, discussions, workshops and presentations in school to promote their values.

### *Kunbabony*

Kunbabony is a house in Hungary which of right now inhabits 10 people permanently with the goal of establishing a social and stable community in their house. In their everyday life this can be achieved via helping each other out with various tasks in their house. Basic chores like cooking or cleaning are therefore distributed between each member of the household. Furthermore, Kunbabony is trying to find a solution for ecological problems, for example via building a garden or a compost heap. To promote this way of living to other people outside the community, Kunbabony is regularly hosting workshops for children and adults to make them comfortable with their solidaric way of living.

### *Network Lippe*

Wolfgang Sieber, who worked for the Netzwerk Lippe over 25 years, provides an overview about the Network. It's a non-profit company with the goal fostering integration of so called target groups into the regional labour market. Since the funding 1995 the work of the organization was much needed. The government wasn't able to cope with the unemployment situation resulting from immigration from the former Sowjet union and the structural economic crisis. Since then, Network Lippe has developed positively and proven to be a successful motor of (labour) integration on the communal level.

Network Lippe works with so called target groups of the labour market which would be young and old people, single parents, handicapped persons, migrants and refugees offering coaching and occupational offers. Successfully they improve the situation of these persons. One project was organizing a second labour market: the money of the agency for labour paid for restoring water infrastructure, opening social department stores and preserving monuments. 700-800 mostly long term unemployed participate in these projects yearly and in the past 30% of these found a job in the first labour market afterwards. Thanks to Network Lippe many people have the possibility of equal pay and the perspective of long-term employment.

Another project concerns the labour market integration of migrants – an aspect that Network Lippe addressed as the first organization at that time. The focus lies on fostering the self-organization of German-Russian immigrants and training bridge people for their communities. Also, this project has 1500 participants per year.

What is the story of this success? Network Lippe has a unique position in the regional structure – as part of the civil society it functions as a link between the city and the private economy. The dense regional relations with local enterprises and the employment agency and the strong cooperation network enables the organization to foster a positive development on the regional level. As Wolfgang Sieber points out, there is enormous productive potential and a great amount of knowledge on the local level which just needs to be brought together and used. According to Sieber the central institutions are not the ones who are the innovators but it is people who work at the basis, since the key to success is being in contact with people, knowing their needs and establishing trust relations to them.

## **Panel 2: How does cooperation succeed? What forms of cooperation succeed?**

Panel 2 concerned a question that everyone will be confronted with, who is active in social solidaric\_economy: How does cooperation succeed?

To act local is common to all of the perspectives in the conference. Regarding motivation and the possibilities to share knowledge as well as resources, it makes sense to seek a direct impact on a local level. Ultimately, cooperative actors seek to develop an organic expansion of the former seedbed, as the cooperative Kunbábonyi put it. Participants of the conference shared their experiences regarding how that can work.

The FREIRaum Bad Hersfeld mentioned, multipliers can be very helpful to create attention and enhance the capabilities to act local. They could win people with a lot of political impact for their ideas, which helped them to grow organically.

Regarding successful cooperation Thomas Wolfgang Sieber mentions the networking philosophy of Netzwerk Lippe: to find the best ideas for practice through consensus, cooperation and communication. An interesting impulse came from the government introducing regional consensus rounds in the 1990s in order to decide about provided money. This invitation to talk to each other and find a minimal consensus for actions and solution strategies triggered the establishment a lot of cooperations. The cooperation structure survived even though the money ran out in the 2000s. This shows the potential and strength of such organizational forms. In general, when it comes to cooperation Sieber emphasizes trust and continuous communication as crucial, when having to deal with colliding needs. So, dense direct relations and intense individualistic work with the people holds the most potential.

The cooperative Fuchsmühle shared their experiences seeking contact to the local population. They learned to search for unused resources, that can be understood as sleeping potentials in the immediate environment. One example is the cooperation that began with a local inhabitant, who was overtaxed with the maintenance of his house. He met the people from Fuchsmühle, who searched for free spaces to use in a community-based manner. As they got to know each other, he decided to sell his house

for cheap conditions and is now thinking of becoming a member of the cooperative. This exemplifies how common interests can be found and used to evocate cooperative impulses and revive what is already there in order to care for it.

Kunbábonyi explained how cooperation can be supported in the organizational structure. They seek to include everyone, who is active around their cooperative into the decisions that are being made. In order to co-determine decisions they developed a system, that gives those in the cooperative, who are most active and take the most responsibility, more rights to influence the future of the cooperative, but still includes those, who are not as deeply integrated in the organization. This way responsibilities can be shared on different levels of engagement.

We learned from various experiences of successful cooperation that all seek closeness to the local level. In order to grow, all of them are building networks, that integrate different actors and distribute responsibilities democratically. Communication and consensus-orientated decision-making helps to integrate diverging perspectives and realities of individual lifes. Common to all of the shared experiences was, that the collaborative action started under circumstances of precariousness and different levels of urgency. To satisfy their needs, people searched for the potentials that were to find in their immediate environment. In this sense the present reality, as unfulfilling as it might be in the moment, is the starting point to build a better future.

## **Panel 3: Solidarity Knowledge – Ways of Communication and Mediation**

### **1.1 Karolina Babic, CAAP**

The support center for social economy (CAAP) is a Slovenian NGO that aims to support actors out of the social solidarity economy (SSE) sector. Its focus is on educational work that not only conveys conventional business skills but enable citizens to engage actively with politics and civil society while building the foundation for a democratization of work and life. The CAAP consults local initiatives and communities that belong to the SSE environment. Its approach allows to build trusting relationships that are seen as prerequisites for its success. Through the facilitating of peer to peer learning the actors of the SSE share knowledge and is brought together beyond national borders. Another activity of the CAAP is the cooperation with schools and universities that enables them to teach about the principles and practices of the SSE. Though this work had already lead to some success in the form of courses on the SEE, NGOs are still the main institution for SSE related education, but the CAAP is planning to implement an own course of study on the university of Ljubljana.

### **1.2 Solidarity Economy Center Budapest**

The Solidarity Economy Center in Budapest is a development agency for co-operatives that wants to contribute to the establishment of an integrated SSE sector. For this purpose, the Center offers consulting services and fosters a network of regional cooperatives, which enables them to share their experiences and knowledge. The center has partner organizations in the housing, care, and energy sector. The political situation of the SSE movement in Hungary is contradictory, because on the one hand socialist ideas are delegitimized through the historical experience of the country and current political campaigns, on the other hand forms of mutual aid based on solidarity are already widespread because the state and the market aren't able to meet the needs of the people. Therefore, the SEE is to be understood as a reaction to the capitalist crisis and is a phenomenon that arises organically in response to gaps in supply and unemployment.

### **1.3 Kristina Bayer, VFSSOE**

The Association for the Promotion of the Solidarity Economy from Germany is committed to networking and knowledge transfer within the SSE. It emphasizes that the situation for SEE companies in Germany and Hungary is similar and that both are confronted with the same challenges. In its educational work, the association relies on a form of knowledge transfer based on solidarity, which is enabled through learning methods like co-design and collaboration, approaches that have already spread within conventional companies and organizations. Another tool used by the association is the “Map of Tomorrow”, a collaborative online platform that registers SEE actors, therefore supporting the cooperation of regional SSE organizations. Companies of the SEE in Germany and Northern Hesse are present in the agricultural sector in which they are well connected, but they are increasingly represented in the housing, energy, elderly care, and cultural sector, as well as in the manufacturing industry and in the service sector. To strengthen the entire SSE sector the association enables the central availability and production of knowledge, in order to allow individual companies to benefit from the experience of others and set off synergy effects within the sector. Consulting in the SSE must be differentiated according to sectors and has to account for different sets of needs. At the political level, the association is striving for a new legal form for cooperatives, an example here would be “responsibility ownership”, which was conceived by the Green Party, among others. It can be said that in times of crisis policies that support the SSE can gain momentum as small and medium-sized companies are looking for alternative solutions to maintain their independence from big business. Such political reactions have already happened, for example with the establishment of a state agency for the transfer of knowledge and advice to founders in the SSE sector by the conservative Bavarian government.

### **1.4 Sion Whellens, CECOP**

CECOP is the European Federation of Co-Ops in Industry and Services. As part of a global network of national federations of cooperatives, one of CECOP's main tasks is to lobby for the interests of cooperatives, which is why the federation's secretariat is located in Brussels. As Sion Whellens points out, CECOP brings together diverse stakeholders. As part of the CECOP office in London, the work there is currently strongly influenced by Brexit; London is the only country with a CECOP association that is not in the EU. However, CECOP is not only about the EU, but also about

knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange. This is done by conducting studies on SSEs, among others in Germany, in order to identify problems and opportunities for cooperatives. This includes, for example, how the cooperative can become a more attractive form of business in Germany, how to deal with the complicated bureaucracy in Germany, or how to organize an association of SSEs in Germany. CECOP also organizes forums for exchange regarding SSEs. At a 2019 conference in Manchester on the theory and practice of cooperatives, one of the topics discussed was whether and how cooperatives can attack big tech companies. In the UK, CECOP also organizes the worker coop solidarity fund, which supports grassroots cooperatives. How this money is used is decided democratically. Another level of knowledge transfer and knowledge acquisition at CECOP is the debate about what work is really needed: how can cooperatives contribute to reducing working hours and breaking down hierarchies? The Corona crisis also raised the question of how cooperatives can use the crisis.

### **1.5 Karolina Silna, Ecumenical academy**

The Ecumenical Academy was founded in 1996 in the Czech Republic. The NGO is dedicated to the goals of equality, human rights and justice by promoting democratic, fair business practices. The Ecumenical Academy serves as a networking partner between local and global actors in the field of Fairtrade and SSE in Central Europe. The NGO promotes Fairtrade products, took a pioneering role in the Czech Republic in this regard, and itself works according to the principles of the SSE. But the NGO is also active in the transfer of knowledge about SSE. The Ecumenical Academy offers trainings on the development of SSE, among others within the framework of an Erasmus+ project. The training follows a modular concept and is offered in cooperation with the SSE network Ripess Europe. This provides a variety of training guides and materials that are also used in various other projects for knowledge transfer on SSEs.

### **1.6 Markus Blümel, KSOE Wien**

The KSOE, short for katholische Sozialakademie Österreichs, which could be translated as catholic social academy of Austria is active in the field of adult education. The focus is on the areas of participation democracy and transformation in civic education. The topic of SSEs is an important part of this, and a course on this has been

offered at KSOE Vienna since 2018. This course informs about SSEs and thus also serves to support (future) cooperatives. Various aspects are taken into account, including alternative forms of ownership, alternative management and democracy in the workplace. A variety of practical examples from Europe are considered in the course, and people from these SSE projects are also involved in the teaching. Among these examples are the Mandelbaum publishing house in Vienna, which was transformed into a cooperative, a cooperatively run grocery store that is in direct exchange with sustainable suppliers, or the Rückenwind association of Austrian cooperatives.



## **Panel Discussion**

Various social solidarity economy projects from Germany and a project from Hungary were presented in the panel discussion. The focus of the panel was on the types of connections that are essential to make a solidarity-based social project a regional and/or international success. Furthermore, attention was drawn to changes, problems and difficulties facing the projects, especially during the pandemic.

The first project aimed to build autonomous communities in Hungary. The village of Janoshida was presented as an example. Janoshida is a village of 2600 inhabitants, where demographic change is clearly noticeable, i.e. society is getting older and older, as young people often move to a larger city or emigrate to Western Europe, where job opportunities are more diverse. As a result, there is a shortage of workers in the village, especially nurses. In addition, there are economic and social problems due to political issues, which make life in the village even less attractive for young adults. The project, which is an initiative at the local level, deals with the transformation of rural areas into communities where care for the elderly is ensured. By working with local people, a “soft community” is to be built, i.e. a community and new houses built. In order to combat the problem of emigration, Europe should be seen as a whole, rather than perceived through the national level, i. e. the countries of Europe should work together to find a solution. Moreover, the issue of care for the elderly in particular is a cross-generational issue which can only be answered by cooperation between the generations. The consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic are clearly felt here and have intensified the hardship, as both the “social gap” and the “care gap” continue to grow, i. e. economic differences in society are becoming ever greater and at the same time care must no longer be taken for granted. Establishing a “permaculture” can counteract the problem. “Permaculture” is about improving social interaction and satisfying the most basic social needs, such as the need for care. It is also important to support small, local businesses in order to be more independent from large companies whose influence is being felt more strongly by the pandemic.

The following projects are local projects from the German region.

The Ackersyndikat is a sister project of the “Mietshäuser Syndikat”. The principle of the “Rent House Syndicate”, i.e. the transfer of private houses for communal use and self-governance, has been applied to rural real estate. Up until now, only urban properties have been rented within the project. It should be noted that although the

residents live there self-governed, the house does not belong to them, so they are not allowed to sell it. The Ackersyndikat offers real estate, such as farms, to promote agriculture in the region. The speaker, Gunter Kramp, explained that it is now the right time for this project, as the prices of arable land are rising sharply at the moment.

In the third lecture, the project “Eco-model region” in the Schwalm-Eder district was presented. The aim of this initiative is to collectively organize small companies and freelancers in the region, in order to expand their economic possibilities, such as getting access to the wholesale market. The goal of the project is that farmers in the region join forces, set common objectives, whose implementations are then discussed by project coordinators, and thus avert the displacement of small farms in the region by large agricultural companies, such as supermarkets, which are constantly expanding their business. Supermarkets are increasingly offering organic products, which are also becoming increasingly cheaper. The long-term goal of the eco-model region is therefore to re-establish awareness in society for high-quality organic products from local farm shops. The focus is on regionality and organic quality of the products in order to support fair organic farming. However, in order to achieve this objective, bio-directives would have to be amended. At the same time, however, the coordination of supply and demand must also be optimized, because the determined efforts to bring the quality of local small businesses back to the public’s awareness may lead to an increase in demand, so that production has to be adapted, which creates new challenges. So it is a two-sided development.

In the fourth lecture a second company from the project “Eco-model region” was presented. In the district of Astwald-Rotenburg arable farming is less common, although there is a lot of green space in the region for potential cultivation of fields, but cattle breeding and slaughtering are widely practiced. Arable farming is only a sidetrack for the company, so there is a different set of products compared to the Schwalm-Eder circle. Nevertheless, the same principle is applied as in the Schwalm-Eder district, with the difference that the focus here is more on the organic feeding of the animals that are to be slaughtered. However, the problem of large agricultural companies becoming more prevalent than local small farms is also clearly noticeable here, as structural change has almost led to the complete displacement of small farms. The next presentation was on the company “Berglandkräuter”, which is supporting small local farm shops and especially young farms. The company buys the regional products from the farm shops and markets them. One of their problems is climate

change, which makes harvesting conditions more difficult and leads to crop failures. As a result, small farms are able to offer less, so that the Berglandkräuter company has to find new suppliers to meet the demand. As a result, they are no longer able to be fair-trading partners, even though they actually want to promote these small businesses. Despite such difficulties, the company pursues the objective of maintaining product diversity even in times of climate change. Currently, the pandemic is leading to yet another change, namely away from natural cost trading and towards online trading. People passively support local farms, which otherwise would not survive the crisis, by buying sustainable products online.

After the presentation of the different projects, the District Administrator, Torsten Warnecke, commented on the current situation regarding organic products. He explained that it would be a mistake to reduce the size of agricultural land in Hesse, as otherwise the supply of food would no longer be guaranteed. He also felt that the purchase of organic products should be increased, but also raised the issue of comparatively higher prices, since offering organic products in schools, for example, is a good idea in itself, but the social dimension should not be ignored, as not everyone is economically able to buy the more expensive organic food. The long-term goal should be to focus on the sustainable use of resources, which in particular refers to the displacement of arable land, because he believes that Hesse is an area that is well suited for arable farming. This opportunity for the cultivation of sustainable products should not be left untapped. In order to support this development or promotion of agriculture, initiative must be shown and a permaculture established, because, as Torsten Warnecke concludes at the end, permaculture cannot be established from the office.

Following the presentation by Torsten Warnecke, a discussion round was started, in which all participants had the opportunity to clarify ambiguities and questions that had arisen.

First of all, it was about strategies to strengthen the local economy. Companies such as “Berglandkräuter” need to be supported more during the pandemic (e.g. by online trading, the positive development of which was already explained by the company’s representatives in their presentation). In addition, a solution must be found to compensate for the economic weakening caused by crop failures caused by drought. In the discussion, the proposal was made to expand agriculture in order to strengthen the economy. Another topic of discussion was the question of the need for workers in agriculture. This question triggered a debate on education and training. There is a

shortage of apprentices in the 13 eco-model regions, which makes it impossible to maintain the knowledge of the farmers. In addition, there is strong competition for qualified professionals who can work in the field of organic farming. Furthermore, there was talk of alternative ways of training, which are better adapted to the needs of companies than the previously common three-year training. One suggestion was a free training group, which organizes itself. However, this training path would be an enormous double burden, since apprentices would have to train and work at the same time and bear the costs independently. Funding by the district would be indispensable. Next, the issue of awareness raising was discussed. How is it possible to achieve more visibility?

Markus Blümel explained that there must be support in kind, such as the financing of school food, from the public sector to ensure that even people with few economic means can afford organic products. It is also about poverty reduction and social equality.

Thirdly, the issue of care in countries such as Hungary was discussed. The hardship in Hungary is growing, as the “social gap” and the “care gap” are getting bigger and bigger. The “social gap” must take into account both economic and ecological aspects, i.e. the economic situation of the individual persons determines their ecological actions, because only those who have the appropriate economic means can buy organic products and thus contribute to a sustainable use of resources. In the case of the “care gap”, a comparison was made between Germany and Hungary. The fact is, care is difficult in both countries, because Germany has also experienced a lack of trained caregivers that could ensure the care of the elderly. Due to better conditions, the nurses in Hungary emigrate to Germany, which means that the local jobs remain vacant. This means that while Germany is trying to compensate for the deficits in the care sector by foreign professionals, the deficits in Hungary are getting bigger and bigger. It is necessary to build a permaculture that transcends national borders, which means that Europe must act collectively to find a solution for the care crisis.

Then the problem of the “social gap” in Germany was intensively discussed, because a lack of awareness for regionality and “framing” is a problem. More emphasis is placed on the economy than on regionality. One example was the import of peppers, which grows better in Spain than in Germany. The second problem: “Framing” is the development of prejudices about organic products, namely that they are always expensive. As a result, people are no longer concerned about them and many people

are investing more in consumer goods than in high-quality food. The consequence is that producers of organic products have to lower their prices in order to compete. Producers compete with each other on prices until they can no longer be reduced, which places an enormous burden on individual farms. The solution would be uniform prices for organic products (also in supermarkets). At the same time, the difference between organic and non-organic products must also be made clear beyond the price. There is a need to raise awareness of organic products in society, which in turn is a long-term process.

At the end of the panel discussion, each speaker gave a final statement. Various statements were made, such as the need for countries to cooperate internationally to ensure an exchange of ideas and experiences in order to benefit from mutual support. Furthermore, it was stated that the means to the end of the organic movement is not to let the market work for itself, but to show initiative and thus ensure solidarity structures, democratic controls and economic inclusiveness. In addition, different ways must be found to ensure the financing of organic products at all levels, starting with school meals. By distributing organic products in schools, children can be introduced to the diversity of organic products and education in nutrition can be promoted, thereby raising awareness of good food quality from an early age. The idea of the “edible city” also arose, where people harvest their food independently and thus become aware of the quality of the products. There must be more projects where children learn more about the origin of food. It is also important that farm shops get more attention, because at the moment people prefer to go to the supermarket for convenience and not think about the farm shops fighting for their economic survival. In addition, it is important that small farms, especially those that are currently in the process of generational change, are supported and encouraged in their structure, because it can be difficult for newcomers to the industry in particular. All businesses have a right to exist and should have the chance to participate in the market. To sum up, it can be said that raising awareness about organic products is an overall educational task, which should not be neglected.