

# Farmfluencers of South Tyrol

## A visual story collection and reinterpretation of neighbourliness to support the eco-social transformation and preservation of small-scale farms in South Tyrol.

South Tyrol is on the one hand dominated by monocultures of apple and wine cultivation, on the other hand, this region is trendsetting in the transformation to more sustainable agriculture. This project is exploring the current state of agriculture as well as alternative and future-oriented concepts in this region. Even though, conventional agriculture is an intensively and critically discussed topic, especially pioneers of transformation don't feel supported by their direct neighbourhood. With the formation of an independent group of pioneers "Farmfluencers of South Tyrol" (working title), this project aims to encourage, inspire and help local and future farmers to make a step towards organic production as well as to strengthen the relationships between the local pioneers of sustainable agriculture of South Tyrol.

An online platform, as well as a travelling exhibition and mutual farm visits, will serve to collect and to visually display the personal stories, thoughts, and discussions of the "Farmfluencers". They will be shared and recorded individually on the farms and at a convivial round table of all "Farmfluencers". Their transformation steps, business models, fears, and opportunities will be made visible and accessible and can become a role model for farms of other regions, a collective consultancy and inspiration resource for generational change, transformation, and on-farm income diversification.

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### Introduction

Behind every product we eat, behind every gaze, we let wander over the landscape stands a farmer, that is producing food and whose work influences the landscape's appearance. But what does it mean to be a farmer? How can small scale farms hold their own against large industrial farms and how do they deal with climate change and critical discussions about their way of performing agriculture? I grew up on a small-scale farm in Germany and would describe myself as a situated knower in these topics. Since my childhood, I experienced how much work it is to run a farm and to have different lifestyle and knowledge than the people from villages or cities. However, when I started to research about agriculture I had to find out that I don't know anything besides having basic knowledge about plants, and animals. My father ran the farm part-time while working in a full-time job. He used to plant a high diversity of species, knew the names of his cows, had enough own fields to feed them and was working on circular small systems.

The number of agricultural enterprises in Ottenbach, a village located one hour south of Stuttgart (Germany) where I grew up, fell between the years 1979 and 2010 from 59 to 35 (statistik-bw.de, "Betriebsgrößenstruktur seit 1979"). Based on these developments, around 24 stalls around Ottenbach are empty today. Since 2015, also the stall of my family's farm is empty and will be abandoned soon since I am the only child and never showed interest in it.

With the societal and my raising awareness for climate change, the need to work on

sustaining small scale farms becomes more urgent and the more I feel the need for digging deeper into this topic to support and foster transformation.

We need alternative farmers because the current way of agriculture is destroying our fertile topsoil and is fostering the rise of the global temperature. Furthermore, farmers currently suffer from not being valued for their work neither by society nor by policymakers. Besides, the farming business is a very complex system. Especially small-scale farms have to work on many levels to guarantee their livelihood.

Living in South Tyrol since 1,5 years, I see a significant advantage of working on the topic of agriculture in this region, because it is a highly essential part of and for society, especially in the region of Bolzano. In general, South Tyrol has a local added value of 4,8 % in the agricultural sector (Niederist and Streifender, 2018, p. 73). This number is very high, compared to Germany (0,68 %) and Italy (2,1 %) (World Bank and CIA, "Europäische Union").

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the local food supply received more attention. Most inhabitants of Bolzano saw empty vegetable shelves in major supermarkets for the first time of their life, despite the local farmers continued working and supplying households with delivery services and through small organic shops.

However, also here, a notable decline of farms in alpine areas (Streifender et al., 2007) takes place. This abandonment leads to the growth of forests and shrubs, which in turn, causes the loss of our cultural landscape, which includes e. g. alpine meadows, accessible forests and the mowing of grass along pathways. Further losses affect also biodiversity, habitat diversity, and ecosystem diversity.

In fact, the number of farms in South Tyrol decreased between the years 2013 and 2016 with 28% (Statistiche Istat, struttura delle aziende agricole, <http://dati.istat.it/#>) and this trend continues because especially small-scale agriculture is disadvantaged in many aspects. Since in South Tyrol agriculture is performed on steep slopes, farmers can only survive through innovative ideas that go along with the preservation of soil and landscape. The switch to organic and regenerative agriculture is crucial for their, as well as our surviving and has still not been achieved extensively. However, the preservation of small-scale farms is essential because they still perform a very personal relationship between the humans, animals, and land. They assure that the cultural landscape is preserved and that people get access to a local and food production that takes natural cycles into account.

On the one hand, monocultures of apple and wine cultivation dominate this region. Nevertheless, some areas are already working on the transformation to a more sustainable agriculture intensively e. g. Mals, Vinschgau. Agriculture in South Tyrol is already the target of numerous networks, collectives, and research projects such as muu-baa by Alastair Fuad-Luke. Thus, experienced partners to collaborate with and to learn from, are very present and available.

Even though, conventional agriculture is an intensively and critically discussed topic, especially pioneers of transformation still don't feel supported by their direct neighbourhood. So, the understanding of neighbourliness must go beyond geographical vicinity to a value-based vicinity.

Farmers, who have very various levels of education and live in very diverse circumstances, have varied abilities for innovative thinking. In order to address this issue, this project can make information accessible for those that are willing to transform to achieve both, ecological and economical resilience. Through building up a visible local network that is independent of organic labels, or traditional associations, the project achieves a higher knowledge diversity in innovation and alternative ways of farming. As a result, it will bring farmers together, that are working on the preservation of the soil and beauty of South Tyrol's landscape every day. Moreover, the network will empower others to do so as well. A farmer, that is able to inspire and influence others, is a farmer-influencer or short: "Farmfluencer".

**The overall aim is to create an inspiration source and to facilitate a resilient network of mutual learning and support for and of small scale farms and future farmers to collect inspirational ideas, reinterpret neighbourliness, create collective help to preserve farms, diversify the income and, thus, transform towards sustainability and self organized empowerment.**

**The core project purpose**

We see now a lot of pressure created by climate change and COVID-19 that acts on the regimes of politics and markets of agriculture. Following the Multilevel perspective of Geels (2002, p 1263), this is the moment where windows of opportunity offer niche innovations, like new multifunctional concepts of agriculture, the possibility to become the new state of the art and therefore, affect the current structures.

The project "Farmfluencers of South Tyrol" (working title) collects stories of local innovative farmers including their transformation steps, business models, fears, and chances. Furthermore, the group of "Farmfluencers" has the possibility to connect in order to extend the traditional understanding of neighbourliness, to create together and to support each other. With the project, I want to strengthen small scale farms as crucial parts of local cultural landscape preservation and regional development. Through that, I will foster the diversity of sustaining an alternative livelihood in this region.

**Project issues, challenges or problems addressed**

As described in the introduction, small scale farms are slowly disappearing. It is a phenomenon that is currently happening in South Tyrol, as in Europe and worldwide. The progress of this situation causes a multileveled problematic on the economic, ecological, and social levels.

Large farms are expanding and are replacing small ones, who are no longer able to live on their income and increase profit. Exploiting intensive methods and monocultures means loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, and higher pollution. Our topsoil, the most crucial element of agriculture, gets infertile and useless. The independence of small producers is essential to preserve the landscape and ecosystems.

The landscape of South Tyrol and its soil is exhausted. Intensive tourism and years of orchard and viticulture monoculture changed natural cycles or even worse, destroyed parts of the local ecosystem. Therefore, it is not enough anymore to only perform farming sustainably. The current state does not have to be preserved, it has to be improved and topsoil has to be regenerated.

Nevertheless, small farms could be more flexible in adapting to and developing new systems. Especially young organic farms tend to have a well-designed on-farm income diversification (Weltin et al., 2017). Moreover, we depend on small farms because currently 70% of food production is conducted by small farms worldwide (see Interview with Susanne Elsen).

The local ecosystem and landscape are the region's most valuable resources because they are responsible for the citizen's mental and physical health, for the local food security. Furthermore, they are the determining factor of the region's success in tourism. With the loss of small-scale farms, this success is in danger.

Nevertheless, the project can give impulses to the regeneration of the region's most important resource. The project "Farmfluencers of South Tyrol" fosters new relationships, exchange of knowledge and mutual learning of the already sustainable and regenerative working farmers. Like this, new possibilities, visions, and changes will arise, and new practices will be established to create resilience for the farmers and the region.

Working with farmers, especially with the ones that have never seen another life is a challenge to cope with. Besides, especially during the harvesting time, a farmer is very busy, and it will be challenging to convince them to collaborate. As an Eco-Social Designer but also as a farmer's daughter, I have to find innovative solutions to deal with this. A good example to follow is the project initiated by Antje Schiffers and Thomas Sprenger "I like being a farmer and I would like to stay one". They asked farmers to film themselves during their daily routine in exchange for an oil painting of their farm.

**Key actors, stakeholders, collaborators and partners**

The project needs experts that cover diverse disciplines. During my research, I created a growing network of experienced practitioners and partners. The local association of biological agriculture Bioland is an important actor that is experienced in consulting. Besides, there is the traditional farmer's association Südtiroler Bauernbund who provide me with statistics and information about the local agricultural structure. Two further partners are, the farmer Walter Moosmair, who runs an organic small-scale dairy farm in the mountains and Jacob Haller

together with Lisa-Maria Kager who run a regenerative small scale market garden. The focus will be on cooperation with practitioners, rather than academics, as actors working in the same fields and "talking the same language" as the farmers.

Other experts, I already connected with and that can support me with their knowledge are e. g. Susanne Elsen, who is an expert in the field of community-supported agriculture and solidary economy, Elisabeth Tauber, who has experienced the world of mountain farming from the perspective of an anthropologist and Stefan Zerbe who is an expert in landscape ecology.

Furthermore, I can connect to existing networks such as the Alpine Communities Laboratory initiated by Bianca Elzenbaumer, Muu-baa initiated by Alastair Fuad-Luke and BAU initiated by Lisa Mazza, could be important and useful partners in my project.

### **Research questions and design brief**

The question I want to answer together with the group of "Farmfluencers" for themselves and others that are looking for inspiration, is: How can we stay with our farms? The project reaches farmers that are in search of alternatives. It also tries to answer the question of how does our neighbourhood look like and who is there that could help me or that I could support to reach the common vision of preserving small-scale farms in South Tyrol. In my role as Eco-Social Designer, I am going to tell the stories that I collected at the farms. Farming business is always very individual, so the challenge is to display transformation steps and business models by additional encompassing also other factors such as family structure or ownership. Preliminary and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) of interviews was already used in the past and turned out to be a useful tool especially for clustering and comparing data.

Furthermore, the group of "Farmfluencers" will have the possibility to connect in a well-designed convivial meeting in which they exchange ideas, options and help to extend the traditional geographically defined understanding of neighbourliness, to enable self organisation and empowerment. Arising questions, discussed topics and ideas will be recorded visually.

An online platform, as well as a travelling exhibition and organized mutual farm visits, will be the tangible output of this project. They make all gathered information accessible for interested parties, local farmers and future-oriented way. The online platform addresses the future farmers who are most likely a young generation that is researching for new ideas mainly online while the travelling exhibition brings the "Farmfluencer" stories in the villages and will be displayed at places that are frequented by local farmers, e. g. restaurants or churches. Mutual farm visits can be either included in the Farmfluencer meetings or can be offered by Farmfluencer members. The "Farmfluencers of South Tyrol" become a model for farms of other regions, a collective consultancy and inspiration resource for generational change, transformation and on-farm income diversification.

## Project plan

### milestones, and schedule of tasks

<b>July</b>	Define visual language of project
	Contact and connect with farmers that to create a group of at least 5 "Farmfluencers"
<b>August</b>	Design draft for online publication of Farmfluencer stories
	Design a concept for convivial "Farmfluencer" meetings
	Design draft for the travelling exhibition
	Start to write Thesis
<b>September</b>	Organize the first "Farmfluencer" meeting
	Organize the first exhibition of the discussed topics and so far collected stories
<b>October</b>	Finalize the online publication of the stories
	Organize the second "Farmfluencer" meeting
<b>November</b>	Evaluation of the online publication and the travelling exhibition
	Evaluation of the meetings
	Handing in Thesis
	Thesis Presentation

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