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Scaling Up Organic Agricultural Enterprises: An Empirical Study of the Role of Associations of Micro Producers

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Abstract

Background: Development of organic agricultural entrepreneurship often requires “scaling up” from a multitude of individual, largely disconnected micro organic enterprises with haphazard achievements, toward more integrated units, operating more systematically and allowing for replication of their achievements on a larger territorial and temporal scale. **Objectives:** The current states of activity, sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation of Croatian associations of micro organic producers are assessed with a view to instigate and facilitate scaling up processes. **Methods/Approach:** The inquiry is based on thematic analysis of qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives of Croatian associations of micro organic producers. **Results:** Lessening of tension between farmers’ strivings for autonomy and their need for mutual cooperation, trust in interpersonal relationships and organizational structures, and integration through value-based supply chains (VBSCs) are identified as important aspects of scaling-up. **Conclusions:** Scaling-up processes are distinctly path-dependent and, although examples of earlier working practices are welcome, they can seldom be carbon copied in different developmental contexts. Conceptualization of scaling up as intensification of relational interdependencies among various organizational units at several levels of aggregation underlines the need for strengthening the role of associations of micro producers as intermediaries between family farms and other, more complex, inter-sectoral organizational forms. **Keywords:** ecological food production; micro entrepreneurship; neoendogenous development; organic farming; rural development; scaling up

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Introduction

In this article we tackle the problem of scaling up micro organic agricultural enterprises. By “scaling up” we understand the process of advancement from the state of individual, largely disconnected micro organic entrepreneurs with haphazard achievements, toward more integrated units, operating more systematically and allowing for replication of their achievements on a larger territorial and temporal scale. The individual entrepreneurs would not have to sacrifice their autonomy during this process, meaning that, if willing, they would still be able to operate their micro farms as distinct enterprises, albeit with a larger social impact, manifested through their greater contribution to the local community or regional development.

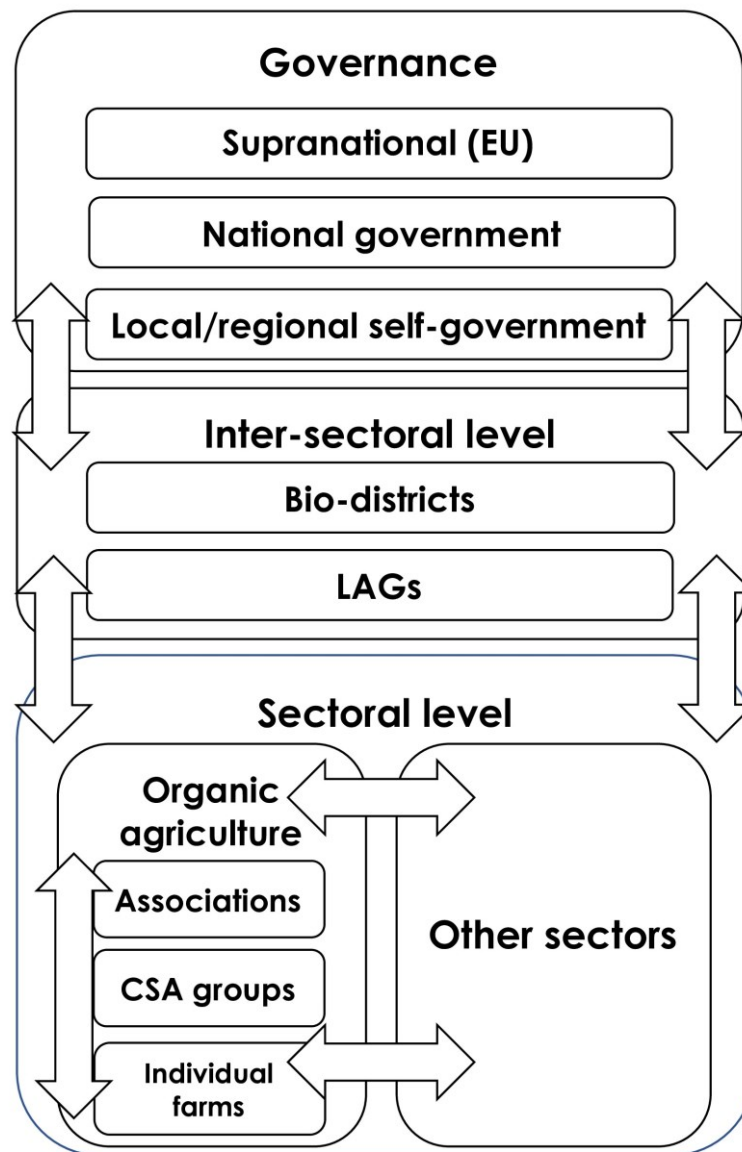
Our previous research (Božić & Srbljinović, 2021) has shown that Croatian micro organic entrepreneurs largely operate under a self-help regime. This means that their businesses are most often established to satisfy some needs of the founders, such as the need to put to use an inherited piece of arable land, to increase household income, to produce healthy food necessary for a healthy lifestyle, or to obtain official certificate for the food already produced largely in compliance with ecological standards. Apart from being important for entering organic farming, self-help also often remains dominant *modus operandi* in the later stages of business development, in the sense that farmers mostly rely on their own strengths and ingenuity to deal with the daily difficulties they encounter in their work. Any farmers face the problem of scaling up their self-help enterprises. State aid is usually not enough and it is too often tailored in ways that only help perpetuate the self-help regime, without enough attention given to the question of where the micro organic farms fit within a larger vision of community or regional development.

Whereas our previous research was focused on individual organic farms (Božić & Srbljinović, 2021; Božić et al., 2022), this article concentrates on the associations of organic producers. In line with the notion of scaling up as inextricably linked to the development of a wider community or a region, we see associations of organic producers as situated within a broader scheme of Figure 1, which is a simplified representation of the main stakeholders identified by our research as relevant for countries such as Croatia, where organic agriculture is largely based on micro entrepreneurship. The aims of our research were to assess the current state of activity, sectoral, and inter-sectoral cooperation of the Croatian associations of organic agricultural producers, and to use this assessment to formulate recommendations as to how the role of the associations in the processes of scaling up Croatian micro organic agricultural enterprises could be strengthened. We shall also underline several more general points by which we wish to contribute to the theoretical discussions of scaling up micro agricultural enterprises.

In what follows we shall first briefly review several approaches to scaling up agricultural enterprises. Then we shall describe the method of our research, including the interviews with the representatives of Croatian associations of organic agricultural producers, and the thematic analysis of their transcripts. After that, we shall present results concerning the current state of the Croatian associations of organic producers. In the course of discussion, we shall place the results within the context of earlier reviewed approaches to scaling up, and within the current efforts of the Croatian government exemplified by the recently adopted *National Action Plan for the Development of Ecological Agriculture 2023 – 2030*. Finally, we shall draw recommendations for policy-makers, and sketch the implications of our findings for theoretical accounts of scaling-up processes in agriculture.

Figure 1

Associations of Micro Organic Producers within a Broader Scheme of Interlinked Stakeholders at Several Levels according to Our Research Findings



Source: Author's illustration

Background

There have been a number of approaches to scaling up individual achievements in agriculture. As a general observation, which we shall illustrate shortly, theoretically richer approaches often miss the necessary extensions needed for their real-world applications, whereas more practically inclined case studies usually lack deeper theoretical underpinnings.

For example, Noe and Alrøe (2003, 2006) conceptualize farm as a self-organizing system, using Callon's (1986), Law's (1992) and Latour's (1996) actor-network theory and Luhmann's (1995) theory of social systems. Although such an elaborate theoretical approach has a potential to extend the notion of an individual farm to "farming systems" (Dixon et al., 2023), we have not been able to find any theoretically

grounded meso- or macro-level extension of Noe and Alrøe's work in the available literature. Hence the practical implications of that work for scaling up individual farming enterprises remain largely unclear.

On the other hand, recent body of research on bio-districts mostly consists of case studies (Dias et al.; 2021; Guareschi et al., 2020; Poponi et al., 2021; Stefanovic & Agbolosoo-Mensah, 2023; Truant et al., 2019), and with some exceptions (Stotten et al., 2018), lacks firmer theoretical grounding. A reader interested in the processes of emergence of bio-districts from constituent lower-level enterprises is therefore doomed to sifting through numerous cases in search of the bits and pieces related to those processes.

In this work we single out two approaches that combine both theoretical and practical considerations and therefore seem to be most useful as springboards for tackling the problems of scaling up organic agriculture in the service of wider rural development. These two approaches are: "peasant-driven rural development" – the concept originating from van der Ploeg's (2008) work on "new peasantries", and "organic regions" – a variant of bio-districts, conceptualized in the spirit of neo-endogenous development (Stotten et al., 2018; Stotten & Froning, 2023). Note that terminology varies: "bio-districts", "organic districts", "organic regions", and "bio-regions" are all very similar concepts that have often been used interchangeably. Generally, we join the call to "support terms that communities use to describe their own spatial identities" (Gkartzios et al., 2020, p.325).

Van der Ploeg (2008) contrasts "peasant-driven rural development", based on territorial cooperatives, with "entrepreneurial farming", based on competition and takeover of farms. While the scaling up under the entrepreneurial farming regime is characterized by larger farms gradually taking over smaller ones, the scaling up in the course of peasant-driven rural development involves formation of large territorial cooperatives that preserve the autonomy of individual farms, such as the North Frisian Woodlands cooperative, which joins some 900 members and covers the area of around 50.000 ha. Moreover, van der Ploeg (2008, pp.156-157) argues that peasant-driven rural development augments value added "both at the individual farm level and at the level of the sector as a whole", and that its multiplier effects are higher than those for entrepreneurial farming.

According to van der Ploeg (2008, pp.23-24), what enables peasant-driven rural development is a "peasant condition", comprising a *self-controlled resource base* and *co-production* in the sense of "ongoing interaction and mutual transformation of man and living nature", which involves both constant *struggle for autonomy* and *patterns of cooperation* "which regulate and strengthen these interrelations".

While van der Ploeg (2008) is concerned with scaling up agricultural enterprises in general, including both conventional and organic ways of production, Stotten et al. (2018) focus on scaling up organic agriculture by a specific way of territorial development known as "neoendogenous development" (Chatzichristos et al., 2021; De Rubertis, 2020; Eversole & Campbell, 2023; Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019; Gkartzios & Scott, 2014; Ray, 2001, 2006). Theoretical foundations of neoendogenous approach can be traced to general systems theory and Luhmann's (1995) theory of social systems (Ray, 2001, 2006).

The concept of neoendogenous development extends an earlier endogenous approach by realizing that a complete endogeny is unattainable in an increasingly connected contemporary world (Ward et al., 2005). Therefore, whenever needed, reliance on local, internal resources and strengths, should be aided by extralocal involvement "through the national up to the European level" (Ray, 2006, p.278). The extralocal agency is conceptualized as ideally "coordinating, managing, enabling"

(Shucksmith, 2009, p.4) or “facilitating” (Zeuli & Radel, 2005, p.48) the efforts of a local community, which still “has, or must acquire, the capacity to assume some responsibility for bringing about its own socio-economic development” (Ray, 2006, p.278). Neoendogenous approach is thus primarily concerned with setting up multi-level, inter-organizational and inter-sectoral linkages to bring about local development (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019; Ray, 2006). We have tried to represent the key linkages with arrows in Figure 1. We did not want to encumber the figure with too many arrows but, in essence, the more “closely knit” the scheme in Figure 1 becomes, the closer the resulting organizational structure would reflect the ideals of the neoendogenous approach.

Stotten et al. (2018) use Ray's (1998, 2006) neoendogenous framework to analyze development of organic regions in Italy, France and Austria. Organic regions are conceptualized as “territories where farmers, citizens, public authorities and other local actors realize a formal agreement aimed at the sustainable management of local resources, based on the principles and model of organic farming and on the agroecological best practices, in order to boost the economic and sociocultural development of their community” (Basile et al., 2021, p.9).

Stotten et al. (2018) have been particularly interested in the contribution of value-based supply chains (VBSCs; Feenstra et al., 2011; Hardesty et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2022) to the development of organic regions. VBSCs are the supply chains that “attempt to enhance small and midscale farmers' financial viability by capturing price premiums in the marketplace for the environmental and social benefits (values) embedded in the products” (Feenstra et al., 2011, p.71). Stotten et al. (2018, p.138) emphasize importance of not only vertical linkages along the VBSCs, but also “the horizontal integration and collaborations among groups of farmers or processors.” They underline “the value of trust” as central, “not only in personal relationships, but also in organizational structures” (Stotten et al., 2018, p.138).

Stotten et al. (2018) identify various actors as crucial for the development dynamics of bio-districts: processors of locally produced food in Austria, farmers' cooperatives in France, and the local branch of the national organic association in Italy. In all the three cases, however, the external impetus came in the form of facilitative regulatory frameworks: through the LEADER network in Austria, through regional policies with funding opportunities in France, and through a combination of legal acts on rural and quality districts, leading to the idea of bio-districts in Italy (Stotten et al., 2018).

Methodology

Data were collected in the beginning of 2022 by means of fourteen semi-structured interviews with the representatives of Croatian associations of organic producers. The interview protocol included groups of questions inquiring into: activities of the association; financing; organizational structure; sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation; community impact; obstacles to work; plans for the future; and basic data about the association and the participant.

The sample encompassed representatives of 11 associations of organic producers, the Croatian Alliance of Associations of Organic Producers, 1 association of organic gardeners, and 1 association engaging in a spectrum of developmental activities including organic agriculture. Most of the associations were organized at the county level, with two associations covering the territory of more than one county. To our best knowledge, at the time when the research was carried out, these 14 associations comprised the entire population of associations of organic producers in Croatia, except for one association, the representatives of which declined invitation to participate.

With the exception of the association of organic gardeners, the majority of members of these associations were not individual persons, but entities engaged in organic agriculture, mostly family farms. The associations had 46.5 members on average. However, when the National Alliance and the association of gardeners, which both had numerous members, were excluded, the average dropped to 29. This figure shows that the associations under consideration were fairly small. The only two associations with employees were the association of organic gardeners, with 2 employees, and the association whose activities encompassed but were not confined to organic agriculture, with 6 employees.

According to the function in their respective associations, 11 participants were presidents, 2 were secretaries, and 1 was a member of the management committee (Table 1). This selection ensured that participants were knowledgeable about Croatian associations of organic agricultural producers.

Table 1
Summary of Participants' Data

Function	Age	Gender	Education	Experience in Agriculture	Experience in Organic Agriculture
Secretary	41	Female	University	20 years	20 years
Member of management committee	62	Male	High school	18 years	12 years
President	53	Male	University	13 years	13 years
Secretary	59	Male	College	From childhood	8 years
President	49	Female	University	10 years	10 years
President	45	Female	High school	13 years	13 years
President	45	Female	University	20 years	15 years
President	49	Male	High school	17 years	17 years
President	33	Male	University	9 years	9 years
President	62	Female	High school	13 years	13 years
President	40	Female	University	8 years	6 years
President	55	Female	High school	10 years	10 years
President	58	Female	University	10 years	10 years
President	41	Female	College	16 years	16 years

Source: Author's own

Nine participants were females and five were males. Their average age was 49 years. One participant reported involvement in agriculture "from childhood", and the rest of them had 14 years of experience in agriculture on average. Experience in organic agriculture was 12 years on average. Five participants completed high school education, two completed college education, and seven held a university degree. Of the latter seven, four held a degree in agriculture. A comprehensive summary of relevant data on the study participants is provided in Table 1.

The timing of interviews coincided with the peak of COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia. Inessential face-to-face contacts were discouraged by health authorities and many people were reluctant to meet others in person. To minimize possible non-response due to health concerns, we decided to conduct all interviews by telephone. Prior to interviewing, each participant was extensively informed about the research, and their informed consent was obtained. The research received ethical approval of the Department of Sociology Committee on Research Ethics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. The interviews lasted for 44 minutes on average.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were cleared of any data indicating participants' identities. Data were extracted by thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011) with the help of MAXQDA 2022 Plus qualitative research software. Thematic analysis of text segments led the formulation of initial codes, which were subsequently further revised and fine-tuned on criteria of necessity, sufficiency and relevance. The analytical process resulted in themes and thematic clusters encompassing interconnected themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2024), that presented the overall perception of organic producers' associations concerning their position and role in local and regional development processes.

The initial round of coding resulted with descriptive codes (Gibbs, 2007, ch. 4), roughly corresponding to the earlier mentioned thematic groups of questions that were posed in accordance with the interview protocol. *Activities of associations* and their *sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation* proved to be the most important themes related to our discussion of possibilities for scaling up.

As we iteratively reviewed and refined our initial codes, we moved toward analytic coding (Gibbs, 2007, ch. 4). These later coding cycles were theoretically informed in the sense that we concentrated on participants' utterances that could be related to the main issues raised in the earlier reviewed theoretical accounts of scaling-up processes in agriculture. Themes that emerged through such analytic coding included *the tension between farmers' strivings for autonomy and the need for mutual cooperation, trust in interpersonal relationships and organizational structures, and integration through VBSCs*.

In the next section, we describe results corresponding to each of the five identified main themes. When describing results, we use verbatim quotations from the study participants to bolster key analytical points (Rose et al., 2015). Translations from Croatian to English are our own. Whenever a research participant is cited, the number in parentheses at the end of quotation denotes the participant's ID.

Results

Activities of associations

Croatian associations of organic agricultural producers are currently fairly weak and small. They are largely underfunded. Most of the measures within the Croatian Rural Development Program have been tailored to the needs of individual farms. However, associations often do not apply even for grants for which they are eligible due to lack of personnel, time, administrative capacities, and experience in writing project proposals.

Moreover, associations of organic agricultural producers are officially categorized as professional associations. As such, they are not eligible for various lines of funding under the broad rubric of institutional support to civil society offered by various public and private funding bodies. Thus, unlike associations in other segments of civil society, associations of organic agricultural producers find it difficult to develop and stabilize their organizational capacities relying on assistance from funds for civil society development.

Not surprisingly, the activity level of associations of organic agricultural producers is not very high. Their activities are mostly limited to small-scale projects, such as educational workshops for members, participation in organic food fairs, seed saving and exchange, establishment of organic gardens in local schools, dissemination of information for members, and the like:

"Well, our most important activity is the organization of the local fair, plus we participate where we can, in various events, and promote ecology, organic

agriculture, gifts of nature. We have an event at the local library every spring called Seed Exchange. Then all those who are interested come, listen a bit, exchange experiences and so on. Occasionally, we also have some lecturers who come and talk about organic farming and so on." (3)

Pooling and sharing activities are exceptionally rare. Even moderately demanding activities, such as establishment of local green markets for organic food, are largely out of scope for those associations. Members of some associations considered establishment of online markets for organic products, but were mostly not able to put those ideas into practice.

Sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation of associations

Cooperation between associations mostly takes place through the Croatian Alliance of Associations of Organic Producers. The Alliance, being itself legally registered as an association, shares many of the problems of its member organizations, such as lack of financial support, personnel, and other resources. As such, the Alliance is currently not able to assume the key role in scaling up processes.

Cooperation between associations of organic producers and community-supported agriculture (CSA) groups is another form of cooperation within the sector. CSA groups are informal groups of producers and consumers of organic food, whose gatherings are related to organic agriculture, whether in the form of sale or exchange of organic products, visits to organic farms, various events promoting healthy lifestyle, and the like (Orlić, 2014; Orlić et al., 2019; Sarjanović, 2014; Slavuj Borčić, 2020). Similar to the activities of associations, cooperation between associations and CSA groups is largely limited to small-scale projects such as seed exchange and co-organization of various promotional events that serve the common purpose of advancing organic agriculture. CSA groups are more directed at developing cooperation with producers themselves, than with their associations.

At the inter-sectoral level, the European Union encourages Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) through Local Action Groups (LAGs), territorially organized forms of "partnership between representatives of the public, economic and civil sectors in rural areas" (Baturina et al., 2023, p.166). LAGs have been envisioned as "motors of community development" through inter-sectoral collaboration among a wide spectrum of stakeholders.

The level of cooperation between Croatian associations of organic producers and LAGs is generally low. Only two associations reported membership in LAGs, but one of these two could not cite any example of mutual cooperation. One other association reported intense cooperation with several LAGs on drafting local plans of development, involvement in joint projects and educational activities. One association donated to LAG's funds. Three associations reported lower intensity of cooperation with LAGs, mostly by individual members, in the areas of education, promotion of organic agriculture, organization of gatherings and meetings. Eight associations could not cite any example of cooperation with LAGs.

Several Croatian associations of organic producers, particularly those from tourism-intensive coastal regions such as Istria and Dalmatia, have regular contacts with regional and local tourist boards, which help interested family farms organize tourist visits, participate at local food exhibitions and similar events. Some associations help their members to establish contacts and start delivering their products to hotels and restaurants. However, almost one third of the associations could not cite any example of cooperation with the sector of tourism.

There is some cooperation between Croatian associations of organic producers and educational and scientific institutions, and the interviewed representatives of the

associations expressed their openness, as well as the wish to improve that cooperation. The forms of cooperation include lectures of university professors to members of associations, as well as lectures of organic agriculture practitioners to university students, on select topics related to organic agriculture; study visits from high schools and universities to family farms; providing assistance to local schools in eco-gardening and environmental education in general; and participation of organic producers as informants in scientific research such as the one reported in this article.

As Croatian associations of organic producers are largely organized at the county level, and counties are units of regional self-government in Croatia, cooperation with counties is the main form of cooperation between associations and regional self-government. The most frequent form of such cooperation is small financial support, usually on an annual basis, from a county to that county's association.

The Zagreb County is by far the most active in supporting its organic producers and it was the first Croatian county which adopted a very ambitious *Program for the Development of Organic Agriculture until 2030*. The *Program's* goals by 2030 include, among others, 100% of agricultural land under organic farming; 100% organic food in kindergartens, schools and hospitals; and an organic menu in all restaurants and rural tourism facilities in the county (Karoglan Todorović & Znaor, 2020). The county's association of organic producers participated in the *Program's* creation by providing suggestions and feedback on drafts, and it has been involved in the *Program's* implementation.

Some associations, particularly the Croatian Alliance of Associations of Organic Producers, have their voice heard at the national level of government through their representatives in several committees of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Of all the associations participating in our research, only the Croatian Alliance of Associations of Organic Producers tries to develop international cooperation, e.g. with the ARCHE NOAH Seed Bank, but even for the National Alliance, membership fees in some international organizations proved to be too high.

Sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation of Croatian associations of organic producers have been summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Cooperation Profiles of the 14 Associations of Organic Agricultural Producers

Association ID	CSA groups	LAGs	Tourism and HoReCa	Science and education	Local/regional self-government
01	✓		✓	✓	
02	✓		✓	✓	✓
03		✓		✓	✓
04					✓
05	✓		✓	✓	✓
06		✓	✓	✓	✓
07			✓	✓	✓
08	✓		✓	✓	✓
09	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10		✓	✓	✓	✓
11				✓	✓
12				✓	
13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: HoReCa denotes Hotels/Restaurants/Cafés, i.e. hospitality industry

Source: Author's own

Both forms of cooperation are largely dependent on the networking and coordination abilities of the few enthusiastic individuals within each association. This is not surprising as the earlier described structural weaknesses of the associations significantly limit both the scope and intensity of their cooperative efforts.

Autonomy vs. cooperation

Croatian associations of organic agricultural producers are currently fairly weak and small. They are largely underfunded. Most of the measures within the Croatian Rural Development Program have been tailored to the needs of individual farms. However, associations often do not apply even for grants for which they are eligible due to lack of personnel, time, administrative capacities, and experience in writing project proposals.

Considering van der Ploeg's (2008) constituent elements of the "peasant condition" as a foundation for scaling up through peasant-driven rural development, our results indicate that the tension between farmers' "struggle for autonomy" and their need for cooperation may be problematic. Our previous research among individual farmers has shown that Croatian organic producers are somewhat ambiguous in regard to cooperation (Božić & Srbljinović, 2021). They tend to provide considerable rhetorical support to cooperation; yet, when it comes to putting cooperative principles into practice and reporting about their cooperative efforts, there is less evidence of enthusiasm. This study lends further support to these findings. Croatian associations of organic agricultural producers are not only small, but also have few active members:

"Frankly speaking, as in other associations, one, two, or three [active members] is the maximum. Everything is more or less on my back and I'm towing things the most in this association of ours, and in the county. One of my colleagues jumps in every now and then as much as she can. (...) Colleagues are active at the meetings, I can see that they are interested and make suggestions, but the actual operational duties are more or less up to me." (4)

Other authors studying Croatian organic producers report similar findings. While Croatian organic farmers have largely positive attitudes toward cooperation with other producers, their actual associational life is more modest (Zrakić et al., 2017). When farmers cooperate, "their cooperation is based only on the exchange of experience in production" (Bokan et al., 2019, p.407).

In our earlier research among individual organic farmers (Božić & Srbljinović, 2021), we had come across a participant whose motto had been: "Stand on your own two feet only!" A participant in the research reported in this article provided a similar example of extreme individualism from her experience:

"A brother and a sister took over the business from their parents. It works great and they have grown to a stage when they can sell all their products: 'Why should they team up, why should they work with anyone else when they are doing well?' Well, there will come a moment when they won't be well anymore, they don't really realize how little it takes for them to be unwell, and they didn't want to team up with anyone. So, there are those who are doing well, who found a market for themselves, and who reason: 'I did it myself, why should I team up with others when there was no one who helped me?'" (13)

While participants in this study, who all assumed the leading roles in their respective associations, did not express such extremely individualistic attitudes, a tension between strivings for self-sufficiency and wider social concerns was nevertheless echoed in the words of participants:

"I'm an old fellow, my goal is to produce for my grandchildren and my customers, while some social goals, well I won't say that I'm not interested, but I'm discouraged by an overall approach to organic agriculture (...) starting from legislation (...)" (2) This quotation is particularly interesting as it also hints at the problem of trust to which we turn next.

Trust

Results of an earlier study indicate that Croatian organic farmers "show a low level of trust in key agricultural services and institutions as well as towards people in general" (Bokan et al., 2019, p.407). Our results are very much in line with these findings. We have already cited the participant who feels "discouraged by an overall approach to organic agriculture," indicating a lack of trust in social institutions, legislation in particular. Another participant went to a great length searching for causes of the current lack of trust in recent war in Croatia, but even more in rapid, predatory privatization that ensued:

"I think [as an obstacle] of a mindset that does not understand that community and wider concerns are our future, instead of everyone looking for themselves only. Such mistrust is in large part the result of the war, but I think even more of the privatization that instilled in people extreme cautiousness: 'Don't trust anyone because anyone who wants to connect with you must have some hidden interest!' The same thing happened with cooperatives, as money was given especially to veterans' cooperatives, and that again proved to be unsuccessful because it was done by force, only to give some money to someone. Again, people have seen: 'Aha, another attempt failed, again someone messed something up!' Do you understand? Without trust, there is no development of a society. I keep saying that, as that is the key to the whole story." (13)

Excessive administration and paperwork, as part of monitoring and control procedures in agriculture and rural development, only deepen the rift in trust between farmers and state institutions. The "zero-risk approach" adopted by European policy-makers, assumes "distrust as the default position" and "leads to excessive control and interference, with an emphasis on box-ticking and procedure" (Cloos, 2024, p.2). This is particularly pronounced in organic agriculture, where controls of compliance with standards of organic production are frequent and rigorous. While most participants understand the necessity of controls for upholding standards of organic farming, they also complain that the actual procedures are often too complicated and time-consuming, that too much administrative burden is placed on the farmers' backs, and that the extent of regulatory micromanagement sometimes borders with absurdity:

"I want to say at the end [of the interview] that bureaucratization has taken off in organic agriculture. What I fear is that many people will give up certification precisely because of bureaucracy. I don't mean that people will give up organic farming practices, but I think that the environment has simply become too demanding in terms of paperwork. (...) This is the biggest obstacle to any further development, and at the end of the day, all these laws and conditions under which you work are developed by bureaucrats who do not know [organic agriculture]. We had a meeting last year in the Ministry where it was discussed why some kind of rulebook was passed where it was expressly stated that a hoe must not be used in orchards." (12)

Another participant mentioned a similarly absurd case when bureaucratic procedures required wild mushrooms, as ingredients of an organic product, to be ecologically certified.

Value-based supply chains (VBSCs)

VBSCs are important for discussions of scaling up as they “can enable groups of farmers to aggregate their products for distribution at a larger scale while maintaining their unique business identity” (Peterson et al., 2022, p.386). In particular, VBSCs have been regarded as backbones around which bio-districts may be formed (Stotten et al., 2018).

We know from our previous research (Božić & Srbljinović, 2021) that individual organic farms in Croatia have been involved in incipient VBSCs. Some farmers, for example, supply organic products to the restaurants that value organic food. Other producers supply their products to public sector entities, such as local kindergartens and schools. At the time of writing, 31 elementary schools in the City of Zagreb have been involved in a pilot project of green public procurement of organic food from suppliers such as family farms (The City of Zagreb, 2024). Furthermore, on the input side, some Croatian organic producers acquire manure from local organic livestock farms.

However, this research has shown that associations of organic producers have neither been able to aggregate products of their members for distribution at a larger scale, nor have they used the opportunity to pool resources of their members to process larger quantities of their products, or acquire larger quantities of agricultural inputs at better price. Seed exchange is one of the seldom reported activities of associations that can be related to VBSCs. In other words, although associations of organic producers have been suited for “horizontal integration” (Stotten et al., 2018) along the VBSCs, this opportunity has largely been missed by the Croatian associations so far.

Discussion

Analysis of the results indicates that scaling up Croatian micro organic agricultural enterprises is not an easy task. Currently in Croatia there are neither cooperatives of organic producers nor organic regions or bio-districts. Struggle for survival often pushes farmers more in a direction of autonomy than toward mutual cooperation. Developmental trajectory of Croatian micro organic agricultural enterprises was heavily path-dependent. It was influenced by the recent war, followed by rapid, predatory privatization (Kotarski & Petak, 2019). The results of those destructive influences are felt in low levels of both inter-personal trust and trust in public institutions (Henjak, 2017; Linstead & Strabac, 2007). Overly bureaucratic financial allocation, monitoring and control procedures exacerbate the problem of trust in institutions in the agricultural sector (Cloos, 2024). Low trust impedes collective action necessary for cooperative accomplishments (Latusek & Olejniczak, 2016).

Overcoming barriers to trust is indispensable for any cooperative effort. Indeed, results of a previous study among Croatian organic farmers show “that the desire for mutual cooperation of organic farmers is related to (...) a higher level of trust in local government and other organic farmers” (Bokan et al., 2019, p.407).

However, national policy-makers do not seem to be enough aware of the barriers to trust and the need to overcome them. Although Croatia recently adopted the National Action Plan for the Development of Ecological Agriculture 2023 – 2030, none of the 40 measures envisioned by the *National Action Plan* foresees any of the Croatian association of organic producers, the National Alliance including, as either a leader or at least as a co-leader of the implementation process for any of the measures (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). Hence, this opportunity to send a signal of trust from the national decision-making level to the associations of organic producers was missed.

Furthermore, although the *National Action Plan* notes that “in Croatia, it is not common for organic producers to form cooperatives” (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023, p.97), no action is foreseen to deal with the observed problem.

Trust can also be built bottom-up. Due to limited available resources, this research could not include interviews with representatives of CSA groups. However, it is well-known from earlier studies that trust and shared values are integral parts of consumer-producer interactions within CSA groups (Opitz et al., 2019). Trust plays an important role in Groups of Solidarity Exchange (GSEs), a particular form of CSA groups in Croatia, the members of which do not require official certificates from organic producers, but rely instead on interpersonal trust (Orlić et al., 2019). The relations of trust are established and strengthened during community events such as common gatherings and visits to organic farms, where visitors can witness first-hand agricultural practices used in food production processes. GSEs can be regarded as a Croatian version of the “local food movement,” which gives precedence to “trust and confidence in the social and ecological integrity of (...) food” over excessive standardization, certification, and control (Ikerd, 2017, pp.5-6).

CSA groups are important for raising grassroots awareness and coordination of ideas about desirability of organic production (Orlić, 2014). Common ideas, interpersonal trust and shared values are undoubtedly good starting points for scaling up micro organic agricultural enterprises. CSA groups have also been instrumental in establishment and strengthening of VBSCs (Sarjanović, 2014; Slavuj Borčić, 2020).

However, CSA groups do not develop trust in institutions, as their activities are mostly informal and they attempt to circumvent traditional social institutions. Furthermore, only more complex organizational forms, such as associations of organic producers, can provide access to organizational and financial resources necessary for, e.g., applying for tenders, larger-scale projects management, lobbying and policy influence, networking with foreign and international organizations of organic farmers, and other “more formal” activities, which are all necessary for a stronger development of the sector. While CSA groups are certainly important elements of organic agriculture, it is difficult to envision scaling up, in the sense developed in this article, solely by means of CSA groups.

Bio-districts have also been mentioned in the *National Action Plan*. However, except providing an example of a good practice from Italy, and two brief remarks on the potential of bio-districts for eco-tourism development, the *National Action Plan* remains silent on how exactly bio-districts could gain a foothold in Croatia.

The *National Action Plan* rightly recognizes potential for cooperation between the sector of organic agriculture and the sectors of tourism and hospitality, and the *Plan* envisions measures for strengthening that cooperation. However, the *Plan* falls short of developing a broader vision of bio-districts, or other forms of inter-sectoral cooperation, which could also include cooperation with cultural and creative industries in conjunction with heritage-based rural regeneration, or cooperation with IT sector in more vigorous development of online green markets for organic products, for example.

There are bottom-up initiatives in the tourism sector, such as the establishment of an association of small environmentally-friendly renters in the region of Istria, aimed at “strengthening the local economy, preservation and promotion of local values, customs and traditions, and preservation of the environment and local architecture” (*Glas Istre*, 2023, p.2). Such bottom-up initiatives have a potential to become “the main actors who lead the territorial development dynamics” (Stotten et al., 2018, p.150) in direction of “sustainable and circular tourism” (Avasiloaei (Muscal), 2021, p.436), and they should be encouraged to involve micro organic producers as well.

The *National Action Plan* envisions measures for both strengthening and shortening organic supply chains, and it mentions explicitly their value component. The *Plan* encourages public sector institutions, such as schools, to implement green public procurement measures. The *Plan* also includes educational activities for groups and associations of organic producers to facilitate their access to green public procurement tenders. What is lacking again is a vision of broader forms of inter-sectoral cooperation, such as bio-districts, which could grow out of incipient local VBSCs.

While budgeting for LAGs is secured from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, there are no specifically allocated budgets for bio-districts at the EU level (Stefanovic & Agbolosoo-Mensah, 2023). We have mentioned already that various countries adopted various regulatory frameworks facilitating development of bio-districts (Stotten et al., 2018). Croatia is still to establish such a regulatory framework and this could be the reason for the observed vague treatment of bio-districts in the *National Action Plan*. However, a complete omission of LAGs from the *Plan* is more difficult to explain. The lack of guidance on possible involvement of micro producers in both bio-districts and LAGs indicates gaps at the inter-sectoral level of planning, which impede coordination of development of organic agriculture with development of other sectors. Without a proper inter-sectoral coordination, scaling up micro organic agricultural enterprises becomes even more difficult.

A word of caution is needed also as not every organic supply chain is necessarily value-based. Studies of Croatian organic producers' perceptions of the value component within supply chains have been rare and the results so far have been mixed (Gajdić et al., 2017). Our earlier research (Božić & Srbljinović, 2021) has shown that a considerable number of Croatian organic producers of fruits and vegetables distribute their products through large retail chains. However, producers were reluctant to speak about their contracts with retailers because the terms of those contracts were treated as confidential information. One participant declined to answer the question about whether his products were allowed to retain the label of his family farm, or they were lumped together with the same products of other organic contractors. Obviously, if the unique identities of small farms get lost along a supply chain, such chains cannot be regarded as value-based. Strengthening associations of organic producers, particularly their lobbying and policy influence abilities, could mitigate imbalances of power between micro producers and large retailers, and prevent imposition of unfair contract terms by the stronger parties. More generally, conflicts between economic, environmental and social sustainability within supply chains can be mitigated by giving voice to all the stakeholders, addressing their concerns, and trying to integrate their various perspectives early on in supply chains planning and development processes (Pejić Bach, Klinčar et al., 2023; Pejić Bach, Žmuk et al., 2023).

The role of social innovations has also been discussed in the literature on neoendogenous rural development (Bock, 2016). Although we have not come across examples of social innovation during interviews with representatives of Croatian associations of organic producers, our previous research (Božić et al. 2020; Božić & Srbljinović, 2021) informed us about social innovations, such as a mobile and computer application for eco-garden renting and management assistance, which was developed with the help of one of the leading members of an association of both conventional and organic vegetable producers. The *National Action Plan* recognizes the need to encourage innovations in organic agriculture, but the emphasis seems to be on agro-technological innovations. Social innovations have not been mentioned explicitly, although innovative ways of networking and cooperation among various

stakeholders, for example, would be very much helpful in our vision of scaling up micro organic agricultural enterprises.

The *National Action Plan* includes measures for enhancing cooperation between organic agricultural producers and educational and scientific institutions. This is particularly encouraging as participation of small farmers in scientific research has been widely regarded as insufficient so far (Nature Editorial, 2020; Verger & Le Bars, 2024). The emphasis in the *National Action Plan* is again on agro-technological research and education. As our results indicate, however, many of the problems besetting Croatian organic agriculture are socio-relational and organizational, so that dealing with them calls for social-scientific expertise as well.

Conclusion

Prior to the concluding remarks, a brief reflection on limitations of the study should be in place. First of all, the sample comprising 14 civic associations is valid as it encompassed almost the whole population of Croatian organic agricultural entrepreneurs' associations. The Croatian Alliance of Associations of Organic Producers has 15 member organizations. As the sample covered roughly three fourths of the twenty Croatian counties, ensuring a fairly complete geographical coverage, we can be quite sure that the findings are relevant for Croatian organic agriculture. However, due to nation-specific differences in quantity and quality of state support to organic agriculture and other developmental path-dependent idiosyncrasies, our findings can be generalized only to those countries whose organic sectors follow similar developmental trajectories.

The majority of scholarly works on scaling up agricultural enterprises has been concerned with a *posteriori* description of scaling up processes. Discussion of peasant-driven rural development has been, for the most part, based on Dutch experience with territorially organized cooperatives (van der Ploeg, 2008). Accounts of organic regions and bio-districts development have most often shed light on examples of good practices in the service of sustainable regional development (Basile et al., 2021; Dias et al., 2021; Guareschi et al., 2020; Poponi et al., 2021; Stefanovic & Agbolosoo-Mensah, 2023; Stotten & Froning, 2023; Stotten et al., 2018; Truant et al., 2019;). There is, however, a lack of literature on how to instigate and facilitate scaling up processes that have been only beginning to display signs of their potential. In this article, we have attempted to tackle this "incitement problem", which is, in our view, one of the largest obstacles to further development of Croatian organic agriculture.

We have used the mentioned body of literature on successful past examples to address the problem of scaling up micro organic agricultural enterprises, which have, up to now, largely been operating under a self-help regime. As the previous studies already indicated (Stefanovic & Agbolosoo-Mensah, 2023; Stotten et al., 2018; van der Ploeg, 2008), scaling-up processes are markedly path-dependent and, although the examples of earlier working practices are useful, they can seldom be carbon copied in different developmental contexts.

For example, although much of the Croatian agriculture does satisfy the requirements of the "peasant condition" (van der Ploeg, 2008), developmental idiosyncrasies related to the recent war and excesses in privatization emphasized "the struggle for autonomy" to the detriment of "patterns of cooperation". Both interpersonal trust and trust in institutions were ruined. Within the sector of organic agriculture, interpersonal trust has been, in the meantime, renewed to a degree through bottom-up activities of CSA groups. Trust in public institutions remains more problematic, and its renewal requires more involvement on the part of all relevant stakeholders.

Our results and discussion imply that all the stakeholders in Figure 1 should try to develop a sense of a common vision – to become aware of the wider scheme of things and of their own place within it, as well as of their own potential contribution to developmental processes. Indeed, a sense of perspective regarding “my place in the grand scheme of things” has been emphasized in sustainability science as an aspect of human–nature relationships (Gould et al., 2023). Here we assume that the same sense of perspective can be transferred to inter-organizational relations with similarly beneficial effects. On the one hand, this means that micro farmers should become aware of not only their narrow business perspective, but also of their role in local community and regional development. On the other hand, this also assumes that national and supranational levels of governance pay more attention to the grassroots, encourage their participation in decision-making processes, and develop more trust-building measures.

Translated into more concrete policy requirements, these principles require that the *National Action Plan for the Development of Ecological Agriculture* encourage stronger participation of associations of organic producers in the implementation of the *Plan*, empowering the associations by giving them leadership or co-leadership roles in at least some of the envisioned measures. The *Plan* should attempt to transcend the narrowly sectoral perspective by providing at least some guidance to the local self-government units and the county-level associations of organic producers on the actual establishment of bio-districts, instead of only mentioning their desirability. If there are problems with financing establishment and development of bio-districts, innovative methods of financing, such as green bonds (Chahine & Liagre, 2020; Tran et al., 2024), may be considered. The *Plan* should also pay more attention to the CLLD initiatives, the LAGs in particular, and provide guidance with regard to involvement of organic producers, their associations and CSA groups in LAGs.

Local and regional self-government units, counties in particular, should be encouraged to develop their own action plans for development of organic agriculture, considering their regional specifics. Neither all counties can, nor should, set their ambitions as high as the Zagreb County did, but setting at least some kind of milestones, and monitoring their completion, would certainly help regional development of organic agriculture in conjunction with development of other sectors at the regional level.

In the view described above, scaling up means, above all, intensification of relational interdependencies among various units at various levels in Figure 1, rather than mere subordination of the lower-level units to the higher-level ones. In accordance with such a vision, scaled up micro organic farms would be allowed to retain their autonomy, while gradually being more and more strongly involved in sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperative networks.

Going back to the earlier mentioned Noe and Alrøe's (2003, 2006) theoretical framework of a farm as a self-organizing system, we can say that an extension of their approach, beyond the level of an individual farm, should start from the notion of scaling up as relational intensification, which would be in accordance with their view of “a farm enterprise as a heterogeneous network of interrelations” (Noe & Alrøe, 2006, p.47). Second, through the intensification of relational interdependencies, the farm should not only retain, but also strengthen the capacity to “reproduce its own boundaries, as a selection of possibilities (meanings) that are open for the system, selected from a surplus of possibilities offered by the environment” (Noe & Alrøe, 2006, p.44). The social environment of a farm can be roughly represented as the scheme in Figure 1. We believe that the notion of a farm as a self-organizing system can be meaningfully extended along the lines sketched here, but such an extension asks for

a detailed engagement with Noe and Alrøe's (2003, 2006) theoretical framework, which would require more space than available in a single article.

Finally, improving theoretical insights into multi-level, systemic functioning of individual farms and farming systems should benefit practitioners and decision makers at various levels, who "urgently need data, models, and knowledge products that provide user-friendly data collection and analysis capabilities" (Brečko & Žgajnar, 2022, p.24).

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