

Agrarian Movements and Food Sovereignty

A Case Study on the Austrian Nyéléni Movement



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BACKGROUND

- **Transnational agrarian movements are on the rise** as a response to the current multiple crises within the agri-food system.
- One prominent example is the global Nyéléni movement for food sovereignty with around 300 million members

AUSTRIA

- Informal political activities culturally and historically **little embedded in the Austrian society** (Pelinka, 2006).
- **Greening** of mainstream agriculture and a simultaneous **conventionalization of alternatives** in the agrarian sector took place during the last decade (Darnhofer et al., 2010); therefore: Only a **tiny minority** left with the **claim for more radical changes** of the food system (Schermer, 2015)
- Nevertheless since 2011 a small countermovement established when **Attac, FIAN and OeBV Via Campesina** initiated the Austrian branch of the Nyéléni Movement for Food Sovereignty



AIMS OF THE THESIS

- Describe the **movement itself** and show potential and limitations to scale up and broaden the concept of food sovereignty
- Explore if / which different **understanding of food sovereignty** exist within the Austrian movement



METHODS

- Single case study including a **triangulation of qualitative methods**
- 4 Semi-structured expert interviews, a focus group discussion with activists (8 participants) and a document analysis was conducted
- **Lofland's model** of five main aspects of social movements as basis for structuring the research questions, data gathering and results
- QDA Analysis in Atlas.ti - mixture of inductive and deductive coding (Mayring, 2010)

CONCEPTUAL FRAME

Emphasis on the concept of food sovereignty by transnational agrarian movements like Nyéléni explained thru the **food regime theory** (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989)

RESULTS

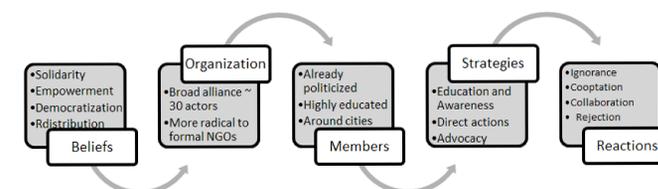


Figure 7. Five Main Aspects of Nyéléni Austria. Source: author's modification after Lofland 2009

- **Concept of Food Sovereignty** - Mutual basis, framework and anticipated goal of the movement
- **Beliefs** - Mixture of post-modern and monetary demands
- **Grassroots organization** - around 30 active actors (NGOs, individuals, networks) with decision making plena, no fixed budget, importance of online communication channels
- **Members** (=Activists) - Strong homogenous background, younger students and an east-west decline in activities in Austria, no rules about joining or membership
- **Strategies** - From workshops, direct actions, lobbying to concrete projects (FoodCoops, CSA) and international networking
- **Reactions** - Ignorance and rejection most often mentioned; but also: cooptation of ideas by governmental officials and cooperation with other NGOs

CONCLUSION

- **Social dimension of movements** is crucial for activists: A stable communication and physical and intellectual spaces for gathering, exchange and project development is important.
- **Internal conflicts**
- **Difficulties** in attracting people from different social origins, ethnicities, political backgrounds and regions (e.g. rural areas)
- Degree of **institutionalization / professionalization** to be aspired
- Concentration of knowledge and power among few members because of a lack of activists
- **Right-wing appropriation** of the concept of food sovereignty since past few years in Austria and Europe
- Very **low presence** of the movement in the Austrian public but the **discursive hegemony** of dominating conservative agricultural representatives is at least being challenged
- Major challenge: to **strengthen grassroots connection while building political power**

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