

INTERVIEW WITH MR. WILHELM SCHUSTER, MEMBER OF BIOCOOP SIBIU^[1]

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Abstract

This interview was taken at the Conference on *Social economy – innovative model for promoting the active inclusion of disadvantaged groups* organized during 12-14 October 2012 in Bucharest and attended by initiators and promoters of social economy activities in Romania and other European states.

Mr. Wilhelm Schuster is a member of BIOCOOP and works in Moşna commune, Sibiu district. He owns an organic farm where he works together with his family and trades regional organic produce. His experience in the business is extensive due to his frequent participation in farmers' meetings and exchanges of know-how organized in Europe and in the US.^[3]

In the interview below, Mr. Schuster made a brief presentation of the BIOCOOP commercial cooperative and highlighted the following issues: why he set up the cooperative, what were his main achievements, what kind of challenges he came across in this business, and how to promote cooperatives in general. Mr. Schuster believes BIOCOOP can be seen as a best practice of the Romanian social economy and urges consumers to have confidence in the regional organic products they buy.

Key words: *cooperative, organic food trade, traditional goods, open household*

^[1] BIOCOOP Sibiu is a commercial cooperative with a democratic structure which consists of 13 farms in Sibiu district and trades regional organic products. BIOCOOP also aims to support organic food producers and increase consumers' awareness by setting examples of regional marketing of organic produce.

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^[3] http://www.ecoruralis.ro/web/ro/Despre_noi/Membri/, accessed on March 30, 2012

1. When did you start working in the field of social economy as part of the cooperative?

W.S. Informally, we started in 2004, and in 2006 we became a registered cooperative. We realized we had been acting in fact as a cooperative all along and decided that it didn't make sense to try another form of organization such as a non-profit association, a limited liability company or a certified self-employed because we didn't want to intermediate between farmers and consumers. Our goal was to function as part of a cooperative in such a way as to allow the farmer to go about his farming business the way previous generations did without having to become certified. In the end, we realized the best organizational structure for us was the co-op: a democratic structure, based on the "one man, one vote" principle, where people come together to capitalize on their own farming products.

2. Do you think that Law 1/2005 is enough to support cooperatives?

W.S. I don't think it is enough, but it can be a useful tool in one's business. For instance, I don't have the knowledge and experience of working with people with disabilities, and here I am referring particularly to sheltered units. All I could do was advice these people to set up their own co-operatives and to produce goods. After all, this is what economy is all about: being able to work and contribute to obtaining a product.

3. What are your main achievements in the cooperative?

W.S. For me as a farmer and member of BIOCOOP, the cooperative was a stepping stone or a display case because it helped me get established, it put me on the map. Currently, I don't contribute much to

BIOCOOP as I sell everything straight from my home, but some farmers may continue to remain members of the cooperative and to participate in the decision-making process because they are not necessarily interested in opening their household to buyers. One thing is for sure: for me, BIOCOOP was crucial and it served as a springboard for my products.

4. What were the challenges in your business?

W.S. One problem we had, especially when we first started our business, was the frequent confusion between the initials of a cooperative society and those of a trading company which are exactly the same (translator's note: in Romanian both organizational structures 'Societate Cooperativa' and 'Societate Comerciala' start with the same two letters and are abbreviated the same, as S.C.).

Then, in 2006 when we actually started our co-op, no one knew how to do the book-keeping for a cooperative and it was difficult to find the right person for the job. Today, we are still receiving requests from people working in other cooperatives that our accountant helps solve.

And last but not least, we are unhappy that, although we were the pioneers of the co-op and we worked hard to get to where we are now (we did lots of research, we identified the regulatory framework that helped us get organized, we held consultations and set the basis for this model), our efforts were not appreciated enough by those who came later and used our model to start their own business.

5. Would you recommend your co-op model to others?

W.S. I believe this model is really the ideal one because the consumers are genuinely interested in seeing for themselves the source of those products they wish to buy. In this sense, I noticed that the trend in the US is the following: „each food has to have a story”. As a result, supermarkets put up posters with pictures of the product that suggest

it is “farm”-based, but the buyer wants to see for himself where the food was prepared and who produced it („know your farmer”). That is why I always tell people who live in the city: „Go look for a farmer close to your home and buy what you need from him!” Consumers appreciate it and are willing to pay more if you open your household and share your products. The problem is that our farmers don’t know how to price their produce and tend to under-price. This usually happens because they price the product based strictly on the cost of the raw materials they used without adding the actual work they put into obtaining that product. Moreover, our farmer is very generous and welcoming by nature and thinks of how things were traditionally done in the past and how people used to help each other. Nowadays though, this mutual support is gone and is replaced with financial aid.

6. How do you think cooperatives should be promoted so that all Romanians know about them?

W.S. They should be promoted in the media, but so far the media has painted a very simplistic picture of the whole thing.

7. Do you think it would be useful to have a magazine that would provide information on the various types of cooperatives?

W.S. Yes, it is a way to provide visibility to the co-ops, regardless of the type of business they run. For instance, if the guidebook launched at this conference will be distributed nation-wide, people will read about BIOCOOP on page 18 and maybe they’ll become interested in buying our farm products.

8. What suggestions/proposals do you have for the project called “Social Economy Model in Romania” co-ordinated by Alternative Sociale Association?

W.S. To start regarding your target groups not as some objects, but as potential entrepreneurs, as people capable to make it on their own. There is a saying in English that goes like this: “Do you want to be a chicken or a chicken farmer?” You must be the „chicken farmer”, which means you must guide them, help them do their work and promote their resources.