

# Almanac of the **Future**

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational Experience No. 35



**NATURE WORKS DIFFERENT FROM THE  
SUPERMARKET**

**LOOKING AT SOLIDARITY AGRICULTURE**

Nature works different from the supermarket –  
looking at solidarity agriculture

*Eating is a political act. Solidarity agriculture, practiced under the name of SoLaWi in Germany as in other European countries, is a possibility of living in coherence with this conviction. A farm and a group of families form an economic community that cares about people and the environment, producing clean, fair and healthy food. Solidarity cooperation, beyond destructive comfort zones.*



## I don't want to hide in my farm

During the visit to the Dollinger family farm in Offenbau – Thalmässing, near Nuremberg - Germany, there is a conversation with Claudia Dollinger. She comes from a farming family; however, her father, due to the low commercial profitability of the family farm, had to leave agriculture as the main source of income to work in construction. “Since then,” recalls Claudia, “my mother bought food at the supermarket.” Claudia, a social worker and educator began working in her profession. Karl, her husband took care of his parents’ farm and was the first in the region who about 30 years ago and against his father’s will began with organic farming. Claudia, six years ago decided to live and work on the farm. Listening to a talk, organized by an Eco bank at the Buschberg farm, which has been producing organic production in an area of 116 hectares since the 1950s, was the last push Karl needed to make a momentous decision: farmer instead of money. Claudia says, “We still have all the agricultural branches in the farm, grains, vegetables and fruit trees, dairy cattle, chickens, pigs, among others. For me it was clear that I don't want to hide in my farm but practice a clean, fair and co-responsible agriculture on par among those that produce and those that consume, that is, between prosumers “.



# What is Solidarity Agriculture or SoLaWi?

## Farmer and consumer at eye level

It is a partnership between a farm with its farming family and a group of private households. The farming family and the consuming families form an economic community, which is tailored to the needs of people, respecting the natural environment.

Based on the estimated annual costs of agricultural and livestock production of the farm, the group undertakes to annually pay a fixed amount to the farm.

This allows the farming family, regardless of market constraints, to carry out good agricultural practices, preserve soil fertility and produce as needed. In return, consumers receive the entire harvest in addition to processed products. The personal relationship makes one feel the mutual responsibility.

The members of solidarity agriculture experience how their food choices shape the cultural landscape, enable social coexistence, nature conservation and biodiversity of species, thus enabling sustainable agriculture to take place.

The essential thing is that a group guarantees the acceptance of the products and that the harvest with everything necessary to produce it is ideally pre-financed or secured

by an annual contract. This commitment gives financial security to the farm. All share responsibility, risk, cost and harvest associated with production.

## More solidarity, less exploitation

Farmers generally only have the option of exploiting nature or exploiting themselves. Their existence depends on subsidies and market or world market prices.

Both are factors over which they have no control, often forcing them to go beyond their personal limits, those of soil and animals, or abandon agriculture altogether. Organic farming is also not excluded from this mechanism.

## Solidarity Agriculture is not a trend but a concept

Solidarity agriculture is an innovative strategy for a vibrant and responsible agriculture, while guaranteeing the existence of the people who work there and contributing to the common good of sustainable development.

[www.solawi-dollinger.de/was-ist-solawi](http://www.solawi-dollinger.de/was-ist-solawi)

## Taking care also means caring for others

The Dollinger farmers gradually entered into solidarity agriculture. The concept of solidarity agriculture has been practiced in Germany for 25 years. There are 240 farms, a growing trend, that currently practice the concept of solidarity agriculture.

In the beginning, the implementation of the concept of solidarity agriculture in Claudia and Karl's farm was not easy. "After 30 years of direct marketing we were accustomed to direct contact with consumers, but this concept falls short compared to solidarity agriculture. We started solidarity agriculture with twenty prosumers in Nuremberg, initially supported by the Nuremberg municipality," recalls Claudia. "Solidarity Agriculture means getting out of the comfort zone, surpassing the thinking where the client is king. We work according to the motto: You want food - I grow it for you and tell you what it costs and what comes out - we distribute it to everyone who participates. Nature works differently than the supermarket; there is not always everything and this is a sign of an intact ecosystem." In the search for additional prosumers, it soon became clear that the mentality of the supermarket of many people was at the expense of its adaptability. Claudia, in the start-up years of the solidarity agriculture gave up to 30 conferences in social networks and neighborhoods in Nuremberg. "I've always shared the same message: we're looking for people who want to keep this farm with us, and when people realize that it's not a marketing hoax, but a solidarity-based concept, many open up with attention and interest." Meanwhile, 280 prosumers, mostly families, but also university students are participating. The Dollinger farm with its concept of solidarity agriculture supplies about 600 people, including direct prosumers and their families. "Our roof," therefore states Claudia, "are three hundred prosumers."





## We all have something to learn

The farm does not work commercially but covers the costs. From the costs arises an indicative amount per prosumer. This amount is understood as a minimum contribution. Give as much as you can, thus allowing the participation of others who cannot pay the full minimum amount. This amount includes the transport of the crop from the farm to the city and the rents for the depots from where the prosumers pick up their harvest. The other part of the contribution to the operation of solidarity agriculture consists of at least 2 half-days of cooperation at the farm and / or participation in informative events of Dollinger solidarity agriculture per year.

The monthly amount for the weekly harvest varies, between 118 and 157 euros, depending on whether it is vegetarian, vegan or with meat. There are also prosumers with half a portion of the harvest and for those who want to try it, is possible to participate in a four-week trial. "Some families make the annual payment in advance, most pay monthly," Claudia explains. The monthly price is determined once a year at the assembly of the prosumers; it is an indicative price that is flexible in the face of possible financial difficulties of some; on the other hand, it invites those with higher incomes - it is estimated that two-thirds of the universe of the prosumers of Dollinger solidarity agriculture belong to this group - to pay a higher contribution. A balance sheet in this regard shows that there is enough room for improvement. "As a farming family, we don't get rich, but we have financial security for the year," Claudia emphasizes. However, working on the concept of solidarity agriculture has meant more dedication and time. "Due to the diversity, the farm requires a lot of labor; in this sense we

opened the farm, until then clearly familiar, to specialized and auxiliary staff,” Claudia adds. Holidays, contributions for retirement and free time are unknown words on the farm. Without the strong commitment of the farming family, thus the external perception, the concept could not work. Claudia agrees with this assessment: “It is precisely this capacity for suf-

fering that has allowed the last family farms in Germany to survive to this day. We are experts in survival, but it is becoming more difficult - 42% of the farms have disappeared in Germany since 1999. What once disappeared, will never come back. The land left by these farms was absorbed by agribusiness. “



## Depots and crooked vegetables

The majority of prosumer families live in Nuremberg and according to neighborhoods, have organized into groups; there are currently 12 groups with their depots in Nuremberg. The depots are physical spaces where the Dollinger farm delivers the harvest weekly. The delivery is made according to the number of prosumers of the group; each prosumer, at their depot collects their share from the common baskets, bringing their bags. The prosumers who live in Offenbau, which is the town where the farm is located, collect their share directly on the farm. The prosumers who live in Eichstätt, Neumarkt, and Ingolstadt, more

distant from the farm, independently organize the weekly pick-up at the farm.

The whole harvest is distributed, also the crooked vegetables. When there is an abundant harvest, i.e.: beet and cabbage, they are also distributed in a processed form such as pesto or vegetable jam. Containers or packaging material are virtually non-existent in the distribution system: all harvest comes in returnable baskets. The prosumers, forming groups around their depot, are gradually transformed into small nuclei that generate in their environment awareness about the concept of solidarity agriculture. Some of these groups also undertake other initiatives of transition and social change. For example, the group of prosumers of the depot in Eichstätt has played an important role in the articulation of a network between different initiatives of civil society; the fairEInt - Sustainable Eichstätt Region Initiative was born a year ago as a result of this process.

“From year to year, we had a fluctuation of around 30% in the prosumer participants, but slowly the circles of participants are becoming more stable,” says Claudia. 7 out of 10 prosumer participants are under 30. “They are people with a sensitivity around ecology and the care of the planet, but their knowledge of agriculture is quite rudimentary. Information and communication are very important; our digital newsletter has 900 recipients. Once a year we conduct a survey among the prosumers to validate our political work”. Dollinger solidarity agriculture participates in the National Network of Solidarity Agriculture of Ger-

### Dollinger Farm Philosophy

**We want to make our contribution to a long-overdue agricultural turnaround. This is particularly important to us:**

Circular and cyclical agriculture - deliver food directly to consumers - farm freely and with time for animals and soil - preserve biodiversity on the farm and its surroundings - climate mitigation and resilience - avoid waste, garbage and packaging material - create fair work conditions - promote diversity in aquatic habitats, farmland, pastures, and pathways - diversity of species, such as animals, plants, fungi, microorganisms - variety of interrelations within and between the aforementioned points

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many that conducts lobbying with parliamentarians in favor of the cause. The range of actions and articulations of Dollinger solidarity agriculture is quite wide: from the popular consultation in favor of biodiversity, through its participation in Fridays for Future and other movements to protest actions.

The nuclear group of the prosumers is composed of two prosumers per group and depot, in addition to Claudia Dollinger, and meet every 4 to 6 weeks in Nuremberg to discuss the operation, pending tasks and possible problems, that are usually not lacking. As a result of the climate crisis in 2018 and 2019, it has rained much less and the early planting of vegetables would not have resulted without irrigation. The nuclear group will have to see ways to deal with the payment of the additional water bill for 8,000 Euros. In these cases, an extraordinary amount is usually set as a fee to be paid by each prosumer. The climate crisis also requires thinking about the installation of a basic irrigation system: an estimated cost of 30,000 Euros. The Dollinger farm has adapted its crops to climatic changes: in summers with little rain, no broccoli is sown.

## Prosumers get together

Dollinger solidarity agriculture invites the prosumers twice a year to cooperate on the farm: the weeding festival and the harvest festival. The entire prosumer community is invited, and a part of it comes to these events. Social cohesion among prosumer families is not limited to the group and their depot but covers the entire community and the farm that provides the food. It has been difficult for everyone to overcome the shopping mentality: either at the farm processing sauerkraut cabbage or the production of sausages or in the kitchens of the prosumers, turning apples in applesauce when the harvest is abundant.

Claudia has made another of her dreams on the farm come true: 15 children visit the farm's kindergarten. "The biggest problem," according to Claudia, "was, in addition to obtaining the operating permit, finding pedagogical staff convinced of the concept





we are looking for: preschool education in the middle of nature, passing through the seasons and thus facilitating the understanding of their cycles.” The idea of a farm school is also on Claudia’s screen, “but someone would have to have to get in control”, she said.

## «We finance the farm and then see what we get»

The dynamics in the depots depend on the prosumers who coordinate it. Marie Döpke and Ina Limmer live in Eichstätt, about fifty kilometers from the Dollinger farm. They learned about Dollinger solidarity agriculture at an informative event of the university in April 2017. It was in September of the same year that Ina with other people decided to participate as a group of prosumers from Eichstätt in the Dollinger solidarity group. Shortly after, Marie joined the group and, since then, they coordinate the deposit in Eichstätt. “Actually, we were looking for a farm with the concept of solidarity agriculture, closer to Eichstätt, but we didn’t find any. In the beginning, we were 10 prosumers, then we went down to 7 and now we’re 11“, the two say. The growth of the group took place thanks to the publicity of Ina and Marie in their social environment. “It is normal for some to leave after an initial phase”.

The fact of not having a choice but eating what’s being harvested is initially unacceptable to some, or at least difficult getting used to. “It’s a different kind of cooking because you pick the recipe according to the harvest and not the other way around“, the two add. Before participating in solidarity agriculture, Marie and Ina bought at the weekly fair and in the organic food shop. “At the organic food shop, there were organic potatoes, but they came from Egypt and I was bothered by the many containers and

wrappers,” says Ina. Marie adds: “At the weekly fair, you also buy from intermediaries, you do not know exactly where the food comes from, and there is always a residual doubt as to whether it really is a product of clean production.” Both Ina and Marie buy other foods in addition to their crops, such as rice, pasta, dairy or fruit, in the latter depending on how weekly harvest is.

“The financial thing, that is, the monthly amount to be paid to solidarity agriculture, for most is not the decisive argument to participate,” says Marie. “I always wanted to have my own garden, to want to leave the role of the net consumer, to have a relationship with the farm, whence comes what I eat. It is a different responsibility that you assume when you are part of solidarity agriculture.” Both now read the weather forecast for the Thalmässing region, where the Dollinger farm is with other eyes.

## «We are in the middle of the process»

Organic farmers and solidarity agriculture farms, when they seek to rent land for cultivation, cannot compete with agribusiness companies. The Dollinger family with their farm opted for the concept of solidarity agriculture in order to maintain their organic agriculture. “Food for people, not for markets,” is the motivation; but without cheap seasonal workers, the farm today could not work. A possible lever would be a subsidy for farms with solidarity agriculture by the German state and the European Union; here the subsidies would certainly make sense. It would also help if prosumer families with higher incomes would contribute more. The Germans, in comparison to their income, spend very little on their food.

Claudia, whose commitment knows no boundaries, belongs to the board of directors of the German Association of Solidarity Agriculture; for the extensive communicational work related to the solidarity agriculture of the farm, reinforcement is necessary. To the final question of why solidarity agriculture. “From the experience that everything else makes no sense. Most of the organic products do not come from farms but also from large companies. Solidarity agriculture is a not perfect system and a learning process for all those involved, but it goes towards the right direction: more solidarity and a supply process with equally distributed loads. “





## Messages to the Future:

Consistency from the field furrow to the cooking pot - there are alternatives without outsourcing damages or expenses, mortgaging the future.

Eat from the harvest, whatever comes: the decisive step from the consumer to the prosumer.

Organic production and food sovereignty: solidarity cooperation beyond the comfort zone.

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