

Scholarship experiences

by

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A report about working in a remote valley in Austria

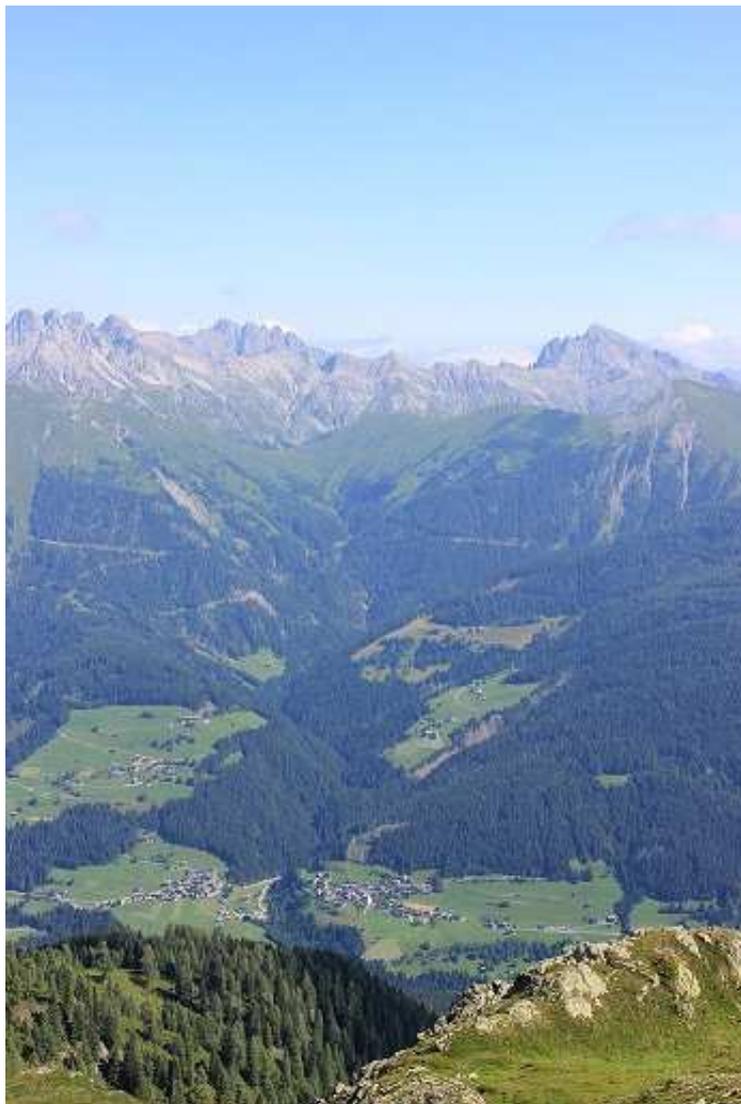


Fig. 1: View of Liesing from the Mittagskofel

Profile:

Hello, I am Fabian from Austria. I took part in the scholarship program offered by forum synergies, from 31st of July to 26th in August this year.

Coming back from traveling at the end of May, thinking about my summer plans, I scrolled through the job offering page of my former university, stumbling over an insertion by Simone, a proposal for an internship about herb production in the Lesachtal. Since I am very interested in botany and I didn't want to hang out the whole summer, I called Simone and we made an arrangement.

That's summarily how I got to take part in the program.

Now a short description about myself:

Although I have no background in farming or even gardening, I started to study Agriculture in 2009 after finishing my civil service. Since then I got more and more interested in how food ends up on our tables.

During my studies I gained insight into many different subjects, for example: botany, economy, zoology, geology to name a few.

Needing a diverse knowledge and being open for different approaches and ways of thinking is what makes agriculture so interesting for me.

I also did an internship at an organic farm in Lower Austria, which was the first time I really got in contact with farming in a practical way. Liking it a lot, I decided to travel after finishing my bachelor studies to gain more practical experience in different systems of agriculture:

I was flying to the Philippines. It was my first time being out of Europe and the western culture and it changed my way of thinking profoundly. For three weeks I was traveling a lot, exploring a few of the many Islands.

The remaining 4 weeks I decided to wwoof at an organic farm on the very south island called Mindanao. Although I didn't do much work, related to farming, because the yearly 3 day festival was to take place three weeks after my arrival and it was all about getting things fixed for the celebrations, building a stage and a bar, most of it with bamboo and driftwood, getting coconuts, but also a little work in the garden, keeping the rice fields clear of weed, etc.

The next stop after the Philippines should be New Zealand since I got a travel and work visa, which was a very good opportunity to combine traveling and earning money.

Picking kiwifruits on the North Island for 4 weeks was an interesting experience.

Shortly after finishing work I started to wwoof on a lavender and vineyard farm near Wellington, before flying to Tonga for a month.

The lavender and vineyard farm was owned by a retired New Zealand couple. Susie was very fond of lavender producing all kind of things out of it, like oil, soap, ice cream, candy and so on. Her husband Vaughan made wine making his hobby after retiring from work.

Different tasks were waiting to get done. First the whole vineyard had to be pruned, after that, rotten posts had to be replaced, and then the lavender needed a cut.

Also, planting orange trees and cutting wood had to get done. Thus there was always something to do, what made the stay at the lavender creek farm, a unique adventure with many new things learned.

Returning from Tonga at the beginning of August I was moving to the South Island to find work again. I got a job as a harvest helper on a big vegetable farm. It was like assembly-line work, cutting lettuce and broccoli and pack it into a big trailer. The company was delivering the whole South Island with vacuum cooled lettuce and broccoli. Even though the work was monotonous and sometimes boring, it was a time full of experience; the work team was quite international; jobbing with people from Japan, Sweden, Chile, Finland, Latvia, France, Great Britain and the U.S. made it possible to learn a lot about different cultures, during many nice conversations and of course to improve my spoken English.

As my visa was about to run out, I booked a flight to Nepal in November.

From a country with high developed technical agriculture, I should move to Nepal, where farming is practiced like hundreds of years ago. I was able to stay with a family which was working on a rice field since 5 decades. The father started to work at the age of 10 and is 60 now. In Nepal nearly everything is done by hand, there are no ploughs, no combines, no tractors, not even horses.

The contrast was quite distinctive: Harvesting rice with a sickle, carrying compressed rice packages afoot to the house for threshing.

Traveling was a very meaningful insight into different cultures and systems of agriculture around the world and I am very glad that I was able to make these experiences.

Motivation:

The possibility to learn more about herbs in an environment like the Lesachtal was the most important reason for me to take part in the scholarship program.

But also to get acquainted with the valley and its people played a big role in my motivation.

To be motivated doing something, means enjoying the things you do. I couldn't imagine working in front of a computer all day, I need to work outside, feel the soil crumble beneath my fingers, that's when I enjoy work, that's when I can work motivated.

Motivation means to me, that the things I do are compatible with my morality.

Description:

I had many interesting things to do ranging from picking weed, harvesting herbs and processing the harvest to labeling the bottled products.

There were three herbal gardens I had to work in. One was the garden for producing; the other two were gardens where Simone's guided tours took place.

Apart from work related to the gardens, I also did a guided tour through a part of the valley with the mayor, Franz Guggenberger, and went to a festival which honored the last active water mills. Both things, which helped to understand the culture and mentality of people living in this remote valley better.

Three conversations I had with different farmers around the valley, helped me to get an insight into problems, advantages and disadvantages of spending a life in the valley. In my spare time I enjoyed the beautiful nature, went hiking, photographing or jogging. All in all I enjoyed the internship a lot.



Fig. 2: Harvesting angelica seeds

Assessment:

The Lesachtal is a very good example of how sustainable rural development could function.

First I want to take a short look on how tourism is lived:

Since the municipality, which has around 1400 inhabitants, keeps the tourist (beds offered for tourists) to native (inhabitants living in the municipality Lesachtal) ratio at 1:1, there is no feeling of just being surrounded by other tourists. This creates an atmosphere of being at a special place, with also having locals to talk to. And the locals on the other hand are not getting flooded by masses of tourists, which makes the valley to a show off for soft tourism.

The landscape and nature also plays a vital role in promoting the valleys tourism. You can barely count all the summits surrounding you. There are so many possibilities to climb, hike or just walk around that nobody (who is a little bit sportive) will get bored too fast. The windy road cutting through the valley is perfect for motor cycling.

Last but not least you have also a lot to sightsee, like the monastery at Maria Luggau or the oldest church of the valley in St. Radegund (around 1000 years old).

It doesn't always have to be about big hotels and fancy spas. The Lesachtal shows that tourism can also work in another dimension, offering mostly homestay or flats for renting, directly at the many farms.

It lays its focus on offering local products.

On the other hand, it's very hard for young people to stay in the valley. It's difficult to find a job and if someone does it will mostly be related to tourism or farming.

I think it's very important that younger generations who intend to stay in the valley get support. Perspectives have to be created, not everybody wants to farm or rent rooms for tourists. It would be important to create other opportunities for young people to gather income. Although easily written, this will be a task hard to achieve.

At the end I want to evaluate the valley regarding to main elements of sustainable rural development. Two main elements for me are farming and tourism; farming because it is practiced for a long time in the valley. Ever since the folks were very innovative to make their work easier, they had to, if you see the steep paddocks where hay is gathered you know why. There are nearly no straight planes. The farming was and still is strongly related to faith. For the people their faith is giving them hope in hard times, something they can hold on to.

Tourism is the second element playing a big part in the valleys rural development. Since the tourism gets developed very slowly and the community members did a lot themselves to shape the direction it is heading to, you can call its development "sustainable" without bad conscience. There are no big hotels disturbing the landscape everything seems very natural and integrated in its surroundings.

The Lesachtal keeps many treasures which are worth to be preserved. Bread for example I rarely ate bread as good as in the valley. Many families still bake their own bread with recipes several generations old. There is so much knowledge hidden under the surface passed from generation to generation from grandmother to grandchildren.

Not much of it is written down; it is handed on mostly by mouth work. These are treasures which are lost fast and then probably forever, the more important it is to protect them.

The last part will be a keyword list in reference to sustainable rural development:

Diversity, community living, closed up cycles, soft tourism, landscape protection, (sustainable) farming, inventions to make work easier (using water power etc.), water mills, self-sufficiency, local products

Interviews:

During my stay I had the opportunity to speak with people living and farming in the valley. Hans Windbichler was the first I spoke to. He took over the farm of his father at a young age. Constantly developing over the years, he also owns a restaurant and offers “living on a farm” for tourists now.

A youth initiative he was part of carried out a survey in the valley around 25 years ago to raise the awareness for problems. It showed that the rate of young people moving away was nearly as high as 90%. To find work in the Lesachtal was and still is hard.

Following the survey's results, EIGL (Eigeninitiative Lesachtal) got founded. It promoted the inhabitants of the valley to bring in ideas on how the situation in the valley could be changed.

The four municipalities Birnbaum, Liesing, St. Lorenzen and Maria Luggau were combined to the municipality Lesachtal. At first the people were not too happy about the change, trying to make their municipality a bit more outstanding than the others before, they had to work together now, combining the different advantages of each village.

Initiatives like EIGL were also founded in Lower Austria, Styria and Vorarlberg. The former Federal Chancellor Kreisky offered a fixed budget for developing these regions.

Every region had to provide a regional leader. Hans got proposed by several people to take the role.

He had to show up in Vienna and although the politicians were skeptical at first, about his young age and his supposed lack of experience, they granted him a one year trial time.

In this year he was setting up some fruitful projects already, the farmers store in Maria Luggau for example which offers all kinds of homemade regional products like sheep wool, cheese, honey, tea, jam, bread, different seeds, sausage etc.

Later Hans got sent a tourism manager from Wels, which should help him to set up a concept for future development of the valley. They were working well together,

motivating the inhabitants for two years to invest in their own projects. A swimming pool got build and many people were renovating their houses, for being able to host tourists. Today the Lesachtal is a great example for soft tourism; it won several awards including landscape of the year in 1995.

The second person I spoke to was Franz Unterguggenberger, a retired farmer and former head of the cultural landscape association (CLA):

Before 1992 there was no support for small scaled farms like many in the Lesachtal. This was one of the main reasons for founding the association.

For getting support the farmers are bound to a code of conduct.

Later EU guidelines (ÖPUL) replaced the program. But these guidelines are only supporting farms bigger then 2ha, so the cultural landscape association was still needed. It supported all farms smaller than that. At the beginning the association was taking care of 28 farms, reclining numbers mostly due to retiring farmers with no follow ups, lowered the number to around 10 now.

The bonuses were adjusted to the ones of ÖPUL, with the difference that they are not bound 5 years to the terms with joining the program.

I was asking about the acceptance of the CLA after founding it. Franz told me: “There were doubts at the beginning of course, but through information meetings and conversations “on the table” it was possible to win all farmers for taking part in the CLA. Nowadays farmers of the Lesachtal using the help of the CLA are getting less and less, as mentioned before there are around 10 farms getting bonuses.

Franz said that the CLA needs to look at new aspects; there are several people which are getting too old to do the whole farmwork (especially mowing the fields and getting the hay to the barn) themselves. Thus it would be a possibility for the CLA to work out a new system to support these people.

Joining the natural conservation program of the EU, Natura 2000, was never a big topic in the Lesachtal, what doesn't mean that the people there don't care about nature.

The Natura 2000 guidelines are just too strict and tight for cultivating the steep paddocks properly.

He also said that the most important thing for the farmers in the valley is to be independent.



Fig. 3: Me listening to Franz Unterguggenberger.

Last but not least I got to speak with Johann Lugger the present leader of the CLA, who is one of the last which are farming on a regular basis.

He has around 16 ha of forest and 7 ha of land, mostly grassland, mown once every two years. They are also growing cereal (wheat, rye and spelt) and keeping 2 pigs, 5 cows and a few chickens. Carpentry and beekeeping are his hobbies.

Before 1972 they sold some meat of the livestock, after the focus lay on selling milk.

Now they have their own drying plant which dries the cut grass much faster and there is no independence on the weather anymore. For cutting the grassland Johann uses the same machine for 35 years now, saying: "It still works properly; why should I buy a new one?"

Producing their own flour, milk, curd, honey and growing their own vegetables and fruits in their garden, they don't really need to buy staple foods at a store. Furthermore they are selling firewood and offer eco power, generated by their own small power plant.

In two years Johann will retire and leave the farm to his youngest son.

Johann and his family are a very good example for managing to farm sustainable in a passionate way.



Fig. 4: Johann in front of his old Unimog (for transporting hay)



Fig. 5: Meeting Johann Lugger (Maria Luggau in the background)

Lessons learned:

A learned a lot during my internship. First of all I could broaden my knowledge about herbs. I learned to make soap, syrup and lotion.

I do internships, because it's much easier for me to remember things if I actually work with them, just reading would make it a lot harder for me to learn something about it. I need to read about how to make soap of course but I would never be able to know if I can do it, unless I do it.

In case of sustainability the valley is unique; it begins with the farmers producing a lot of the stock food products themselves or offer bits of it at the farmers market in Maria Luggau. So people can actually buy cheese "just beside their door". It's not necessary or even possible to get some fancy products from overseas. The people in the valley are depending a lot on their skills and inventiveness.

They need to, because the steep slopes and hills make farming very hard.

Also religion plays an important role in the life of the people. They pray for a good harvest and on Sundays after church many people go to the Inn together to converse about news and experiences made.

Family bonds are playing a very important role too; very often three generations are living together under the same roof, supporting each other.

Living in a big city can make you forget fast what live is about. The most important thing which was present much more at the Lesachtal is; how little you actually need to be happy. There are fewer things distracting you of "real" living.

Action Plan:

The month went by fast, now I am back in Vienna; reflecting things I have heard learned and experienced; making conclusions.

My plan to work on for now is:

- to join a foodcoop, for supporting local farmers and to lessen my ecological footprint
- to learn more about a sustainable lifestyle