

Work Report 02-2021



Rhys Evans and Johan Barstad

**Practices involving Norwegian farmers in environmentally positive
action**

**A descriptive approach adaptation of good practices for developing cooperation between students in
agriculture and the farmers communities**

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The logo for HGGU (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) features the letters 'H', 'G', 'U', and 't' in a stylized, dark green font. The 'H' and 'U' are larger and positioned on the left, while the 'G' and 't' are smaller and positioned on the right. A thin vertical line separates the logo from the text to its right.

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Learning culture(s) in Norwegian agriculture

The history and tradition of Norwegian agriculture dates back to the times when Norway was populated. For most of that time agriculture has been of the subsistence kind, resources for trade ordinarily were obtained from fisheries, hunting, and as time progressed, mining. This remained the main picture up into the 1800s when Norway became a sovereign state (1814 a sovereign state under the king of Sweden, from 1905 full sovereignty). This century also was the time when the Norwegian society started the change from being totally dominated by the primary industries into becoming a modern, industrialised nation.

This societal transformation also had tremendous impact on the agricultural sector. But agriculture retained the traditional character of being dominated by a multitude of small, independent farmers, spread all over the country, and ordinarily engaging not only in farming but also in harvesting from the other resources connected to their land: hunting and gathering in the forests and mountains, fishing on the coast and in the rivers and lakes. Based upon the farmers ownership to his land, this enabled a farmers' class to dominate in Norway.

True, the northern conditions meant there was not such abundance to obtain from the soil, as you found further south, but the combination of farming, hunting and gathering, and fisheries enabled a simple but thriving lifestyle.

As the traditional society transformed, farms no longer remained isolated, self-sustaining units, but were introduced into the growing industrial society. In this society they had to be the main suppliers of the requested inputs:

- labour/manpower. People manning the new factories and other industries had to come from the farming communities, as there was no available working-class in the cities and towns. A strong growth in population in rural Norway made this possible.
- food and other input to maintain the city-based industrial population. Produced by an ever-reducing number of farmers, but growing in output through technological innovations

This called for an agricultural revolution: changing from a subsistence-based farming to a commercial, market-based farming. And the manpower-drain to the cities obligated farming to embrace new methods and technology for production which emphasized machine-labour. This transformation lasted for more than a century and is in many aspects still ongoing.

This resulted in a rather strong growth in both production and productivity, as less people now were producing goods for a larger number of customers. A situation that also called for a new approach towards educating and supporting the agricultural communities.

Up to then, there had been no agricultural education available in Norway. The little new input that did come was mainly the result of educated people in other societal sectors (priests, teachers, administrators) who had experienced innovations and new practices in agriculture during their own educational period. For example, the potato was largely introduced into active Norwegian farming through priests, who had learned about this new crop when studying in Copenhagen or in Heidelberg. Due to the class of small but sovereign farmers, a few of them also took an individual interest in learning; acquiring books about agriculture and visiting places where agriculture was already being modernized. In 1825 the first agricultural training school was opened (Borre in Vestfold, west of Oslo), aimed at training the sons of farmers in the new technologies and methods. Over the next 50 years, training schools were opened in most of the Norwegian counties – except from the northernmost two. But until the Norwegian Agricultural University was established (in 1897 at Ås, close to Oslo), there was no possibility to obtain a higher degree in agriculture inside of Norway.

Growth and optimism

For the first 75 years or so, only a select few got to study at Ås. Just like in Norwegian society at large until the 1970s, higher education was a scarce commodity, and it was not viewed as necessary to develop society. Higher education for others extended only to High School level. And Norway had a policy of sending prospective academics to study abroad. Most of our farmers and foresters in that early period were educated in Germany.

This lack in formal educational possibilities (at the higher/highest academic level), was largely compensated through a mix of local, public and private educational institutions and structures. The institutions generally were the agricultural training schools, offering a one-year programme in how to run a farm with mixed production, focussed upon dairy farming. Also, a system of half-year training (called the winter agricultural training schools) was popular. Winter was the slow time for farming, so the farmers' sons might be allowed to reside away from the family production unit for that short time, but not for a full year.

The structures arising were often established through or in cooperation with the farmers associations and would range from short courses, training on set themes, to long-range field experiments carried out in collaboration with the regional and local agricultural authorities (the personnel educated at Ås most often came back to the communities to fill a new role as administrators and advisers).

So, to sum up, Norwegian agricultural education in the first half of the 20th century was teeming with activities. Mostly self-organised at the local level, promoted and regulated through local agricultural authorities in collaboration with the local farmers associations. The aim: to continue and improve the transformation of Norwegian agriculture to become a valuable part in the modern Industrial (and later service-based) society while providing livelihood and prosperity to the farmers.

In hindsight, this was, in general, an efficient model. It was mainly a top-down model, but as the hierarchy was relatively 'flat and wide' the few at the top each had to work with many at the bottom, leaving quite a bit of power to the farmers themselves and to their local associations. In many it was a good model and one that could function in a period where Norway rapidly was transforming from a traditional into an industrial society – both in agriculture and in the society at large.

Systemic challenges to agriculture

In the 1970s, when the post-war planned growth models were culminating, serious issues were surfacing, showing that Norwegian agriculture was in crisis: Low profitability, a decline in the numbers of farms and farmers, parallel to a strong growth in the other sectors of society called for new action: *how could agriculture be revitalised and retain a position as a tool for keeping all of Norway active and populated?* There were some significant changes as to how agriculture was to be financed (the subsidies-profile), but they seemed only to affect a swing towards maintaining production levels through intensification and centralisation. Thus, agriculture's other national task: maintaining a rural population spread-out all-over Norway, was failing. This called for other measures.

The 1970s thus saw a few examples of new educational attempts to rectify or change this negative trend. A system of regional university Colleges was being established. This was the result of low capacity in Norwegian universities and a general trend to want to make higher education available in the whole of Norway. Some of these University Colleges, especially in rural regions, embarked on a voyage close to agricultural practices when they started degrees in local community development. In the -70s and -80s, this meant to empower local inhabitants to build upon their own resource-base and use that to establish

profitable activities. Mainly, the focus aimed for where space (less crowded than in the cities) and manpower (less costly than in the cities), with the hope to retain population in rural areas through a mix of agriculture with other activities the modern, service-based society craved.

We have examples from this period where degrees were given in subjects leaning on a mix of action research methods and other bottom-up practices. The aim was local empowerment. The method was most often the expertise of external experts. But, as most of them had only a smaller focus on agriculture, they often developed into more generic attempts to promote local development through modern, service-oriented practices: social- and health-related care, production industries at the small scale, etc. Several also opted to work together with local municipalities to develop planning and management systems for the public. But always with an aim to promote new ways to thrive in rural communities distant from the urban centres.

The hyper-industrial agricultural society

In Norway today, agriculture as such plays a small part when it comes to employment. Just like in any other industrialised country, agriculture's share of the employment is down around 2-3 % (depending on how you do the accounting). Production has become intensified, industrialized (larger and more efficient units) and centralized (to regions closer to the markets). Thus, we experience the paradox that the agriculture of today produce more goods on a smaller land-area and with a far smaller number of farms/farmers than it did in 1930s and 1940s. Still, the self-sufficiency of Norway regarding produced food has fallen (we are in the mid-30 % region, among the lowest in the world).

This calls for strategies that aim both towards securing/increasing the domestic production, and towards retaining rural livelihoods (either from agriculture or from other rural, land-use based, goods and services (i.e., the Experience Economy). Several national policy documents have been elaborated to ameliorate this, i.e., white papers to the Norwegian parliament. But they keep on running aground on various (often locally based or relational) obstacles, as they first and foremost are founded in the traditional means for improving agricultural, industrial or service-related activities -- the traditional market-based approaches.

We see an emerging understanding that the old tools (the traditional expert-dominated approaches) no longer are as useful as they have seemed to be. A need to develop new tools that can act more in accordance with the local conditions, to make use of existing possibilities and – in short – to work more from a bottom-up perspective. These will be systems of development which recognize the need to value

local knowledge, and the value of local knowledge, and that local expertise can be instrumental in finding new paths for development.

To illustrate this, we will use our own institution, The University College for Green Development (Høgskulen for grøn utvikling - HGUt in short), as an example. The institution was established as a tool to grow local power and improve the room for local action, and it has grown to become a player on the national scene when designing and implementing local involvement for local action.

The university College for Green Development



HGUt (our Norwegian acronym) has a rather short history in the Norwegian educational system but started within the Norwegian agricultural education system. We originate back in the early 2000s, as an alternative for local farmers to obtain a degree without having to move all the way to Ås for education. We also are founded on the belief that local farmers have skills that are valuable, so they need to use them as a basis when seeking higher education. In other words – we have always aimed to deliver a bottom-up approach to learning. Courses taught here have evolved from basic skills farmers need to function in a market economy (i.e., agricultural economics), towards a broader approach of ‘how to survive, thrive and grow based on what you, your activities and your community have and can put to use’. Our motto is – and has always been – “education and research with the community” as opposed to the traditional mottos stating they are ‘for the community. This shows that we value the experiential knowledge brought to both learning and research, and we find it to be essential in actively forming new knowledge and new solutions.

Thus, our students are encouraged to 'be active and do something' in their tasks. We focus as much on how they work with themselves and their surroundings as we do their formal skills in the traditional subjects. We want to educate people who can be agents of change, who can be facilitators and who know how to work together with local farmers in a farming community to empower them to learn and grow in knowledge based upon their own skills and TEK (traditional environmental knowledge) and help them find out how the formal education can enable them to seek new possibilities.

Experiential learning

Thus, our aim is to introduce students to a situation of experiential learning. Learning through doing and learning through using one's own experience and bringing that in contact with the formal, codified knowledge.

We think this is particularly important when educating students from the agricultural sector. Why? Because agriculture, like no other industrial sector is linked to place and time. It is, through the land component linked to the villages and rural settlements, becoming a prime tool for engaging with communities in developing and promoting their future livelihoods.

Experiential learning demands that students meet with and engage with local communities. This is in many ways a parallel to what we earlier described as the early learning systems established in Norway, where local farmers were involved in developing agricultural practices adapted to their environmental conditions (what will be the best potatoes to grow here?). The farmers did the job, they could each have a small, designated field assigned to the trial, and the results were assembled and analysed by experts, generally from the Agricultural university.

A present-day model for experiential learning could lean on that model, but with an important improvement: One of the things we learned from our experimenting in the 1970s and 1980s, was that we could get good results using the traditional top-down approach in such trials, but that it became harder and harder to have the results implemented into new and improved practice, especially as the economic and financial conditions for farmers became tougher. We learned that implementation success was closely related to how strongly the participants were involved as responsible participants. If they had a role of

power in the trial. If they could participate in the decisions themselves – not only as delivering input for experts to use.

Citizen Science

Our preferred approach is captured in the notion of Citizen science. A term often used today, but, as we see it, also often misused. To us, citizen science describes a situation where the ‘citizen’ (i.e., the farmer) participates on the same basis as we, the ‘experts’. They are not brought in only to ease the gathering of data and the testing of practices but are to function as partners in a common endeavour. We usually say that the participant (in our case the farmer) is the expert – not we. We are experts of scientific methodologies, of survey practices and on the codified knowledge on the subject. The farmer, on the other hand, needs to be recognized as the expert on being farmer X on farm Y in Community Z in 2021. This is a position only she can fill to the full. And, accordingly, any solutions we can bring to her will need to fit with her context and her abilities to be successful. We can not only assume that our solutions will appear as ‘manna from heaven’ because we do not know the context under which an individual farmer is situated.



As stated above, real and strong involvement is important to optimize the chances for success. We have seen, on multiple occasions, that good projects ended when results were presented and the funding stopped, as the potential users had not been included into the development process, so they did not really have any inclination to act. Active partnership and responsible involvement usually result in partners having taken ownership of the process, the concept and the result, and thus will be committed to the on-going use and development of the innovation in question.

We must always remember that when we work with communities, they are the basic elements of any society and they consist of a (large or small) group of individuals. They are communities made up of ordinary people who only have in common that they are each different from the other. At this level it would be futile to generalize – there just are not enough individuals for the law of large numbers to come in effect. That is the case when working with the small communities of Norway, or the communities of Bulgaria. Given this, we might assume that our directions will be a good option for a majority in the community – given we have done a good job. But, in the individual community, with only a select few individuals, success pivots on the uptake or implementation by each of the participants. They are real people and need to be treated as such – with respect! And in our case that implies we work with them not for them. We involve them, listen to them and use them actively to evaluate any suggested solutions that come along.

Involving students – summing up what we have presented here



This takes us to our final part in this section: the importance of involving students actively into cooperation with the local farmers, the local community, and solving of local issues through collaboration at the local level.

From an educational point of view, this could be said to be challenging, because it demands that students to leave the Campus and engage in the communities. This takes time to plan and implement, it takes social investment as relations have to be built up- between the students and the communities. The university must build relationships – and keep them functioning well with local communities, local organisations, and associations. In short – it calls for continuous efforts to keep well-functioning relations with communities.

For students, this is also challenging, as they will need to go out there and expose themselves to the real world of activities. The good thing though is that the community is where we all originate. And for students of agriculture in particular, they are often recruited from the farming communities, so the link to the community is already there – they may just have to reawaken and adjust it.

There may also be challenges with the communities themselves – if they are used to receiving external experts, it may be hard to adjust to a situation where the external expert says, as we did above: no, I am not the expert, you are the experts on being farmers here, so we mutually need to learn from and with each other. It shall not be underestimated that this has many times proved to be a huge challenge. As humans, we often like to take the easiest way – and that often has been to let someone tell you how to act, rather than engaging actively yourself. In that respect, people in communities are no different from

students or university professors. If I can get something with less efforts, I will trend to choose that, not really thinking about what gives the optimal final outcome.

So, working with communities often implies a need to train communities to work with themselves and with external partners. At HGUt, we have developed several training modules for that purpose, modules that we could introduce if there is demand and interest for it.

Innovations in Norwegian Agriculture

In this part we present a short backdrop and a quick run-through of some aspects of what is happening around Norway related to innovative action, especially with regards to agriculture. This action may be the result of local processes alone, of individuals' ingenuity or as a result of collaborative efforts from various stakeholders to work together for an improved agricultural sector and a more sustainable Norwegian community.

The process of adopting new practices follows a trajectory from invention to implementation. In Norway, the agriculture system has, to an extent, been optimized to aid that process. Generally, most industrial agriculture activity in Norway serves a cooperative marketing board that operates as a monopsony – that is, a single purchaser. These organisations exist according to market segments – one for beef, one for chicken and fowl, one for pork, one for dairy, etc. They are also active in supporting their members activities and this includes undertaking research and promoting best practices amongst their members. As a result, actual implementation of new ideas from the laboratory on to the actual farm happens with relative ease. Further, Norway has a number of subject-area research organisations who perform both basic research and promotion of new ideas. Such is the practice and history of these organisations that they are relatively well trusted. Finally, capital for investment in new processes is identified and made available as loans, often through the monopsonies, but through other actors as well.

All the above means that Norwegian Agriculture is constantly changing, albeit at a reasonable pace. Farmers have learned that their lot improves when they follow innovation advice and so are perhaps more ready to take heed of it than they might be otherwise.

One important recent intervention is the establishment by the government of the Green Policy Strategy (White Paper to the Norwegian Storting, 13 (2020–2021), January 2021) which supports innovations in Carbon Positive activities across a wide field of industries and activities. A number of projects and strategies are being initiated in relation to agriculture, under the headline “Healthy, sustainable and climate-friendly food on the table”, inviting farmers to engage in a partnership with government, (local) authorities, other industries and communities.

Innovative Climate-positive examples of agriculture in Norway

The raising of native breed cattle

Some farmers are beginning to turn back to the traditional native breed cattle from their area as these animals were bred locally to be efficient converters of wild grasses, herbs, and shrubs into meat. They require far less grain-based foods and far less time indoors. This reduces the cost of inputs into their production, both economically and environmentally. At the same time, the animals tend to be smaller, although the individual profit per kilogram is higher. An example exists with the farmer Ingve B. Berntsen who has moved his beef production from the typical modern breed to a heritage Norwegian Breed, the Fjordfe ('Fjord cattle'). He is a graduate of HGUT's BA in Innovative Community and Rural Development. He was Norwegian Young Farmer of the Year in 2016 and has become a strong advocate for native breeds.

Fjordfe Gard -- [Fjordfe \(fjordfegarden.no\)](http://fjordfegarden.no)



Sources: www.fjordfegarden.no

Planting heritage plants

At one point in its history, Norway was much more self-sufficient in supplying its own food from the land. The modern distribution system has intervened into this to the point where many food crops once regularly planted in Norway are no longer present. In some cases, new markets offer new opportunities to farmers and one such opportunity is the cultivation of hops for brewing, bred from the traditional plants that were grown on many farms in the past. The self-brew market has grown rapidly and will reward Norwegian-produced products due to loyalty and patriotism. With this potential market, new growing techniques using polytunnels or greenhouses are being developed to re-establish Norwegian hops in the market.

Examples of research and promotion:

[Nå kan du dyrke norsk humle til ølet ditt \(forskning.no\)](#) (Growing Hops - in English)

[NIBIO: Brage: Humle \(Humulus lupulus\) En introduksjon til dyrkning av humle i Norge](#)



Planting exotic plants.

Norway has invested highly in greenhouse production. These artificial environments can be used to produce more than the usual tomatoes, cucumbers and paprikas. One example of this is a trial project to grow Mexican tomatillos in greenhouses. This was successful and the Mexican entrepreneur is now supporting commercial production of tomatillos through her creation of salsas which sell into the local market. Her new company is called Salsitas.

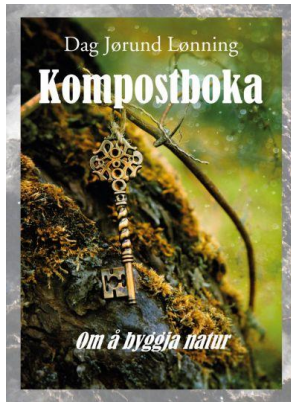
[Salsitas](#) | [Facebook](#)



Carbon positive cultivation

There are a range of cultivation methods which claim to be carbon positive. These include Permaculture, Regenerative Agriculture, some forms of Organic agriculture and others. All can be found in Norway and in particular, Regenerative Agriculture, which includes no-till and compost-based soil care is growing recently.

<https://komposten.no/>



Regenerative Grazing

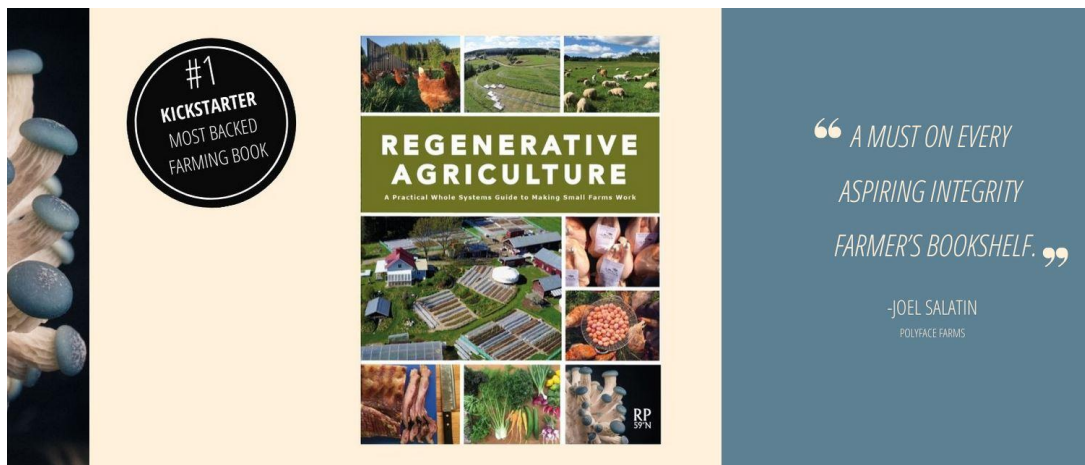
Regenerative Grazing offers farmers a potentially radical tool for the raising of animals for meat. Through what has been called ‘mob-grazing’, large amounts of animals are allowed to graze in a small area for a very short period – 2 – 4 days as a rule. Then they are moved to the next small area and the process repeated until they come back to the original plot. Short term intense grazing such as this increases the soil quality through controlled disturbance, fertilization and grazing which does not overwhelm the capacity of the soil. Particularly when controlling grasses, experiments find that the root systems are many times longer and much more robust. At the same time, the soil quality improves, increasing water retention. This grazing is not restricted to beef cattle, either. Recent experiments with the use of chickens for mob-grazing have been present in Scandinavia and the resulting pastures are of equal high quality, plus the chickens themselves offer a market good which contributes to the farm income.

Links to Regenerative Grazing practices:

<https://www.ridgedalepermaculture.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ximb51DcCSA>

(a discussion on the improvements in pasture through regenerative grazing with chickens, in English)



Bioenergy from muck

In some parts of Norway, where dairy farming is very intense, more muck (cow-waste) is produced than can be put back on the soil, due to Water Framework Directive rules. This has stimulated successful research and investment into using excess muck to produce biofuels, especially methane. In some parts of Norway this has become well established, extending from farm waste to other waste as a feedstock. It offers farmers an economic opportunity to improve their environmental practices.

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwio2syDvdDuAhXCwAIHHTLDABkQFjAEegQIBhAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ivar.no%2Fgetfile.php%2Fivar%2520dokumenter%2Fhandover.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3HgQT_DQymY2pF4GwHm3PL



source: IVAR.no

Improved animal welfare

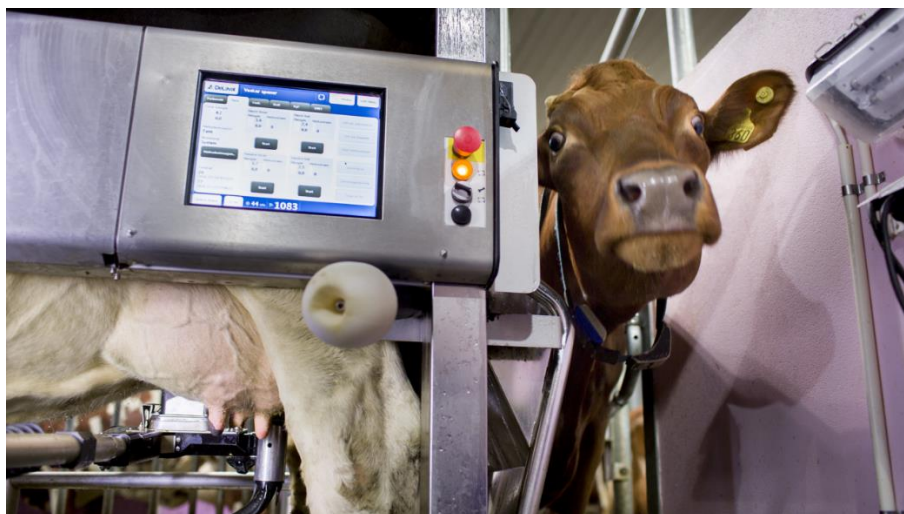
Several governmental initiatives have promoted high levels of animal welfare within the animal production industry. These include regulations for pig-keeping, free range chickens, and rules regarding both indoor space and the requirement to be outdoors for cattle. At the same time, investing in new, high-welfare systems has presented the opportunity to prepare buildings and fields to match other green goals, such as better separation and reuse of manure, waste, etc.

Find below described an example

Robotic milking parlours

Recent shifts in the dairy sector have seen the introduction of robotic milking carousels. These not only offer savings on labour but allow the cows to present themselves to be milked and to go through the whole process independently. Radio-frequency tags allow the animals to negotiate the milking parlour from entry to exit. These types of set-ups only will be found with bigger herds, which economically justify the large investment. Often, however, the investment and support comes from the producer-cooperative which the, in this case, dairy farmer belongs to.

<https://www.tine.no/om-tine/b%C3%A6rekraft/import-fra-cms/ny-teknologi-skall-gi-bedre-dyrehelse-og-tryggere-mat>



Changing of the markets

The Covid-19 restrictions on travel and even shopping have fostered a growth of the budding sector of direct sales from farmers to consumers. Even though schemes such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), or Box schemes have existed in other lands for some time, they had not really caught on in Norway. At the same time as lockdown increased, however, more and more local producers are marketing direct to consumers through Social Media; taking part in frequent 'farmers markets' increasingly being sponsored by the municipalities; and joining mass-delivery rings such as "REKO-ring" which offers delivery every ten to twelve days in a series of major meeting places (often parking lots of Shopping Centres). Customers order direct from suppliers who undertake to be in the assigned spot at a common time. REKO is an 'app' service connecting producers and consumers. The goods are paid for online and the delivery happens at the event.

This and other initiatives illustrate a growing acknowledgement that there is a role for direct-to-consumer transactions within a complete farm economy – producing less volume of goods sold, but higher returns for them. These new channels for both new and traditional products offer another innovation in the food market in Norway and will continue to grow. A short list exemplifying this follows¹:

REKO Ring;

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/272342256880171>

"What is REKO Ring? A simple distribution channel for primary producers and food artisans. A REKO ring acts as a contact platform between consumers and local producers. Local food becomes more readily available to the customer and the producer can sell his goods efficiently without intermediaries. REKO rings can help maintain production on smaller farms, which have extensive operations. The producer gets better profitability by simplifying distribution and cutting out intermediaries."

"Sale Process: Manufacturers advertise what kind of product they have for sale. Customers order goods by commenting on the respective advertisement and specify what kind of goods and the quantity they want to order. The manufacturer will confirm the order. All orders are binding, and items must be picked up at the agreed time. "

¹ all images copywrite the producer's website or Facebook group.



Veisholen Gard is a traditional pig farm which produces many of its own inputs for feeding the animals. The farmer's wife decided to diversify into the production of pumpkins, both of the eating and carving variety, which is very rare in Norway. Her first run was so successful that it was sold out before Hallowe'en.

Veisholen Gard <https://www.facebook.com/Veisholen-gard-107846940876928/>

Product: Pumpkins



Kvivåg Gard is a small animal production farm south of Eigersund who specialize in rare breed cattle and pigs living a free-range lifestyle. In collaboration with a nearby butcher, they slaughter and pack the meat products which are marketed directly through Facebook. They also produce bacon and sausages with their produce and market them alongside.

<https://www.facebook.com/Kviv%C3%A5g-G%C3%A5rd-543544719152299>

Product: free range cattle and pigs, meat products such as sausages



Kohler Paviljong is a small grower who specialises in producing rhubarb within a cultural heritage farm. The rhubarb is produced into concentrate juice and marketed across Norway. The owner, a graduated student of HGut, won the Norwegian Food Prize in 2018 for her “rabarbra saft”.

<https://www.kohlerpaviljongen.no/rabarbrasajt/>

Rhubarb drinks.



All the examples included here are relatively small scale compared to the significant size of the industrial agriculture sector. All innovations, however, began small and what is important is their growth as that is how these things become mainstream. The market for local, seasonal produce and food products produced on the farm has grown significantly in the last few years only, and especially so during the period of lockdown for Covid-19, where there seems to have been a revival in interest in home cooking and high-quality ingredients.

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