



Trapped in a vicious circle: How classification systems hinder organic farmers' associations as rural development actors

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Jasmina BOŽIĆ¹ and Marija ROGLIĆ²

Abstract

Croatian organic farmers form professional associations to overcome individual limitations of time and management capacity, yet these associations reproduce the same constraints at collective level, thus creating a 'vicious circle' that impedes rural development. Based on interviews with 29 organic producers and 14 associations, we identify two mechanisms perpetuating this paradox: state funding frameworks classify farmers' associations in the same category as elite professional bodies (physicians, lawyers), thus excluding them from rural development resources; and these associations restrict their membership to certified producers, thus barring individuals with complementary skills from governance. This post-socialist case reveals how regulatory classifications and institutional legacies constrain civil society's developmental potential—a dimension inadequately theorised in neo-endogenous development approaches. While cooperatives remain tainted by socialist history and other organisational forms prove ineffective, professional associations offer the only viable vehicle for collective action, despite systematic disadvantages. Breaking this vicious circle will require both the recognition, in funding frameworks, of the distinctive public-interest role of farmers' associations, and the adoption of inclusive governance models. The analysis demonstrates how institutional mechanisms can trap rural development actors in self-defeating cycles.

¹ University of Zagreb, Croatia

² MBS School of Business, Montpellier, France

Corresponding author: Jasmina Božić jbozic@ffzg.unizg.hr

Biographical notes

Jasmina Božić is a Full Professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. Areas of her scientific interest include socioeconomic aspects of organic food production, sociology of agriculture, and civil society.

Marija Roglic examines agri-food system transformations and institutional barriers through transdisciplinary research, bridging critical academic inquiry with extensive experience directing rural development initiatives and developing systems-based management education.

Introduction

Collective action has long been recommended as a means of surpassing developmental threshold points that are unattainable for small-scale agricultural producers¹ when they act only individually (OECD, 2013). Yet, despite successful mobilisation, collective action of micro-entrepreneurs often falters, for various institutional, organisational, cultural or other reasons. For example, institutional categories designed for conventional actors constrain community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives in Italy (Rossi et al., 2024) and citizen-initiated rural grocery stores in Denmark (Gandrup, 2025). In Canada, capacity traps entrench small producers in burdens that stifle collective efforts to scale alternative food practices (Beingessner and Fletcher, 2020). Comparable structural limitations are also visible in rural China (Zhang, 2024).

These examples reflect what we conceptualise as a ‘vicious circle’ in rural development, that is, a paradoxical situation where individual micro-entrepreneurs undertake collective action through various forms of civil society organisations (CSOs) to overcome structural limitations, only to find these same constraints reproduced at the collective level. In this paper we analyse a particular case of the vicious circle among Croatian organic agricultural micro-producers who, lacking time and management capacity for their labour-intensive profession, form associations to alleviate these burdens. They however then discover that the same limitations undermine their collective efforts and continue to reduce their potential as rural development actors. We are specifically interested in two research questions: (1) How and why, due to which structural limitations, does the vicious circle arise in the context of Croatian organic agriculture micro-entrepreneurs and their associations as a specific form of CSOs? (2) How can the vicious circle be alleviated, whether by external regulatory action or action on behalf of the micro-producers themselves?

As shown in other national contexts, access to funding and institutional support is shaped by regulatory classifications that often obscure the developmental role of small producer associations. Studies such as the one by Olmedo et al. (2023) highlight how CSOs in rural governance must strategically navigate institutional dependencies, while still seeking to exercise developmental agency.

Despite growing attention to alternative food networks and rural social movements (Constance et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2012; Trenouth and Sovová, 2025), few studies explicitly examine CSOs’ role in rural development (Olmedo and O’Shaughnessy, 2023). The specific institutional mechanisms that enable or constrain these organisations’ effectiveness remain underexplored (Brown, 2016; Wolf and Hufnagl-Eichiner, 2007). Recent works emphasise institutional contexts (Chatzichristos et al., 2021; Olmedo and O’Shaughnessy, 2022) but have not systematically examined how specific regulatory frameworks impact CSOs’ development potential. Our research addresses this gap by identifying concrete regulatory barriers facing organic farmers’ associations and analysing their consequences for rural development.

The theoretical foundation for our analysis draws on two complementary frameworks. First, we draw upon neo-endogenous development theory, which refers to rural development strategies that mobilise local resources and capacities while simultaneously engaging with external actors and multi-level governance structures (Ray, 2006). This approach focuses on setting up multi-level, inter-organisational and inter-sectoral linkages among a variety of stakeholders, including associations and other CSOs, to bring about local development (Chatzichristos et al., 2021; Meador, 2019; Ray, 2001). Neo-endogenous rural development emphasises the importance of both within-territory cooperation and extra-territorial connections in fostering local development (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019; Ray, 2006), which is precisely what organic farmers’ associations should facilitate. The neo-endogenous approach has been used in analysing the contribution of organic farming

¹ A microenterprise is an enterprise with fewer than 10 employees and an annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 2 million. Micro-entrepreneurship is thus the smallest type of entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2003). We use the terms ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ and ‘micro-producers’ interchangeably throughout the article. A small enterprise has fewer than 50 employees and an annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 10 million (European Commission, 2003). ‘Small-scale agricultural producers’ is a non-technical term commonly used to denote both micro and small agricultural producers.



to rural development (Darnhofer, 2005), the development of organic regions (Stotten et al., 2018), and the role of bonding, bridging and linking social capital in rural development (Gandrup, 2025), among others. We see the neo-endogenous approach as a continuation of Granovetter's (1985) theory of 'embeddedness' of both the economy and society in social network structures. This research tradition places particular emphasis on organisation and management of social networks.

Second, we draw upon social differentiation theory, particularly Parsons' (2005) concept of institutional differentiation, and Habermas' (1996) three-sphere model of state, market, and civil society interactions. Proponents of this research tradition, such as Cohen and Arato (1992), are particularly concerned with structural inequalities and power imbalances within and across the three spheres. They argue that negative consequences of these inequalities and imbalances can be mitigated through the process of 'interpenetration' of the three spheres.

We see these two theoretical traditions as complementary: the analysis of social networks can be augmented with the analysis of structural inequalities and power imbalances, whereas the relatively vague notion of 'interpenetration' can be clarified by the analysis of network structures underlying the three spheres. While neo-endogenous scholars recognise rural marginalisation (Bock, 2016), a more explicit integration of the two research traditions can be pursued further.

Theoretical integration of these approaches allows us to examine how organic farmers' associations operate at the critical intersection between economic, political, and civil society spheres, and how regulatory frameworks shape these interactions.

Building on this integrated framework, our work comes close to socioeconomic associationism (Amin and Thrift, 1999; Archibugi, 2000; Cooke and Morgan, 1998), but we also agree that associationism alone "will still leave a deficit of equity and/or democracy which cannot be gainsaid", pointing "to the need for much more work on social infrastructures" (Amin and Thrift, 1999: 311). Research on participation in multi-stakeholder initiatives—inherent to neo-endogenous development requiring cross-sector collaboration—reveals that formal inclusion of CSOs is insufficient without substantive participation rights. Breaking the vicious circle requires the creation of environments that enable substantive rather than merely procedural participation (Dentoni and Roglic, 2025; Lacquement and Chevalier, 2016; Roglic, 2022; Roglic and Galabrun, 2024). The establishment of multi-level, inter-organisational network linkages depends on both appropriate regulatory frameworks and inclusive organisational structures that together determine resource flows and decision-making power—precisely the barriers our Croatian case demonstrates.

Croatia presents a particularly instructive case for examining these dynamics. Previous research identified considerable development potential, with abundant fertile land and a well-developed tourism sector (Božić and Srblijinović, 2021). While the EU Green Deal envisages 25% of cultivated land under organic production by 2030 (European Commission, 2020), Croatia currently has only 7.2% (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023) and lacks a clear commitment to reach the EU benchmark. Compared to neighbouring countries like Slovenia, Austria, and Italy, where organic agriculture is thriving and producer associations are well-established (Schneider and Lysenkov, 2022; Stotten et al., 2018), Croatia has not yet tapped its significant potential, despite being ranked second in the EU for organic farming development potential (Nowak and Kobińska, 2024).

Investigation of this gap has led to exploration of organic agricultural entrepreneurship in Croatia, focusing on micro-entrepreneurs who constitute 98% of Croatian organic producers (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). While initial research identified that enhanced cooperation would benefit the sector, the necessary cooperative linkages cannot develop without stronger civil society engagement (Božić, 2024; Božić and Srblijinović, 2021). In addition to civil associations, organic agricultural micro-entrepreneurs in Croatia may associate through different legal or informal entities: cooperatives, local action groups (LAGs), producer organisations (POs),

and CSA groups.² In this paper we assess the capability of these organisational forms to assist organic micro-entrepreneurs.

Before describing our original contribution, in the next section we position our work within a broader context of theories dealing with the differentiation of society into separate—yet interdependent—social spheres.

Conceptual and theoretical framing

The development of modernity can be regarded as the development of differentiation of institutional complexes that were undifferentiated in earlier societies where all important social functions were performed by a single social institution such as kinship (Haferkamp and Smelser, 1992). Parsons (2005) differentiated four basic subsystems in developed modern society: economy, politics, societal community (civil society), and culture. This differentiation enables the development of individual subsystems of society in accordance with their characteristics, so that individual subsystems do not swallow or absorb one another. At the same time, the differentiation is not complete without interactions between subsystems.

In rural contexts, as rural areas have modernised, agricultural production (economy) has become increasingly separated from community life (civil society) and governance structures (politics). Yet for sustainable rural development, interactions between these subsystems remain crucial. The neo-endogenous approach recognises this need for cross-subsystem interaction while maintaining their distinctiveness, as testified by Ray's (2001, 2006) references to general systems theory and Luhmann's (1995) theory of social systems. The concepts of social differentiation were further developed towards understanding that there are three major spheres in democratic states. Habermas (1996) differentiated state, market and public communication networks, or roughly, politics, economy and civil society. Each of the three sectors should interact with the other two, while at the same time functioning on its own principles, without trying to absorb the other two. Drawing on Habermas, Cohen and Arato (1992) further developed the triple conceptualisation of civil society, state and economy, emphasising that civil society should be protected from both state bureaucracy and a self-regulated market economy. While maintaining the triple-sector scheme of democratic societies, the three spheres should strengthen one another. The state should empower CSOs for functioning in an institutional setting, because civil society in a democratic state exercises important functions. In addition to creating regulatory, policy and institutional frameworks conducive to civil society development, public bodies on different levels may set up tenders and calls where CSOs can apply for public funding. Finally, the economy should build and maintain a solid foundation of resources feeding the other two sectors.

The neo-endogenous approach to development (Lowe et al., 1995; Marquardt et al., 2012; Meador, 2019) has proceeded along the lines of Granovetter's (1985) notion of 'embeddedness' of both the economy and society in social network structures rather than along the lines of the 'interpenetration theory' espoused by Habermas (1996) and Cohen and Arato (1992). This is important because the theories of network embeddedness focus primarily on organisational and managerial aspects of cross-system interactions, whereas interpenetration theories tend to emphasise structural inequalities and power imbalances within and among the three spheres. While the importance of social networks for rural development is undisputable, paying attention to structural inequalities and imbalances of power can reveal a lack of preconditions for network development. For example, most Croatian rural areas include 'left-behind places' (Martin et al., 2022: 15), which lack not only strong community ties, but also the tradition of civic activism among citizens with sufficient education, professional experience, entrepreneurial capital, and capacities for drafting programmes and projects needed to obtain the necessary funding (Bock, 2016). The challenge in such areas is to both build civil society capacities for active solidarity (Shawki and Hunter, 2022) and enmesh the emerging CSOs in multi-level inter-sectoral networks. In the view of Habermas (1996) and his followers, the interpenetration between the three spheres is

² See Appendix for details on these various organisational forms.



endangered by attempts at ‘colonisation’ of civil society from both the economic and the political sphere (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 447–450). Schochet (1995: 263–264) also notes that the notions of ‘private’ and ‘public’ are contestable and that private interests of the economically dominant often prevail, disguised as ‘public’.

As most CSOs need external financial support, they turn to government and business sources of funding, which make them vulnerable to co-optation by state and business interests (Brown, 2016; Tandon and Brown, 2013). To make things even more complicated, although “neo-liberalism is not the same as grassroots development”, neoliberal arguments about inefficiencies of public institutions often resonate with grassroots strivings for greater autonomy and local control (Bebbington et al., 1993: 18). This has lessened the earlier “interventionist role of the state in agriculture” (Planas et al., 2022: 3) but exacerbated the problem of financing smallholders and their associations (Capacio et al., 2018).

One of the reasons why the emphasis on networking of both individuals and groups can cause the neo-endogenous development approach to miss important issues related to structural inequalities and power imbalances, may be methodological. As Beckert (2006: 166) observes, network analysts too often rely on “the under-socialised concept of [rational] action”. Taking into account that Granovetter (1985) introduced the concept of embeddedness in stark opposition to Parsons, Beckert (2006: 166) concludes that the theory of embeddedness has yet to produce a more compelling account of the relationship between economy and society than Parsons’ theory.

One of our main points will be that, alone, embeddedness of micro-entrepreneurs in associational networks cannot solve the problem of non-eligibility of associations of micro-producers for public funding. Decisions on tailoring funding mechanisms, including allocation of and eligibility for public funds, also require the involvement of actors from the political sphere, such as the European Commission at supranational level and governmental bodies at national and local level, as well as public agencies, foundations and other institutions at the intersection of the public and political spheres.

Methods

This study employed qualitative research methods to explore the capacities and constraints of organic farmers’ associations in Croatia. Qualitative methods were particularly appropriate for this research as we sought to understand the complex interplay between the institutional contexts, organisational dynamics, and individual experiences that shape developmental obstacles. The exploratory nature of our research questions required an approach capable of capturing nuance and contextual richness, and we took into account Beckert’s (2006: 166) advice that network research should be supplemented “with more interpretative concepts”. Therefore, instead of measuring the number and strength of our participants’ network ties, we engaged them with questions about how they operated and with whom they cooperated. Our intention was that their answers would reveal how micro-entrepreneurs and their associations play out their dual roles of serving both private and public interests. We adopted a two-phase research design, with the first phase focusing on individual organic producers and the second on their associations.

The primary data for this paper were collected in a research project Organic Food Production in the Context of Local Development in Croatia, implemented by the research team of the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, from December 2021 to February 2022 (hereinafter referred to as research project 2). This project was designed to provide a comprehensive picture of the organisational landscape of organic agriculture in Croatia, with particular focus on civil associations.

The sampling strategy aimed for a near-census of Croatian organic farmers’ associations. Croatia is divided into 20 counties plus the City of Zagreb, with civil associations of organic producers present in approximately

two-thirds of these units. Our sample encompassed representatives of 14 associations from 13 counties and the City of Zagreb, including the Croatian Organic Farmers Associations Alliance (COFAA)—the leading national umbrella organisation comprising 12 member associations. This sampling approach ensured we captured almost the entire population of Croatian organic farms' associations, providing a robust foundation for our findings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 representatives of these associations, that is, with one member of each represented association. The interview protocol covered several key dimensions: the associations' programmes and projects; patterns of cooperation with various stakeholders (media, local action groups, tourism sector, educational institutions, academic community); internal governance and decision-making processes; financing opportunities and constraints; perceived social impact; obstacles to development; strategic plans; and basic organisational data (membership size, employment, etc.). The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and were transcribed verbatim.

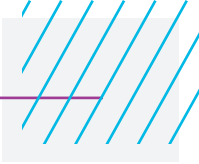
To contextualise these findings, we drew on data from our previous research project Socioeconomic Factors of Micro and Small Entrepreneurship in Ecological Food Production, conducted in late 2020 and early 2021 (hereinafter referred to as research project 1). This earlier study involved in-depth interviews with 29 organic food micro-producers and processors from all Croatian counties and the City of Zagreb, as well as six experts in organic agriculture. These interviews explored socio-economic aspects of participants' entrepreneurial activities, including: motivation for entering organic agriculture; production practices; market access and distribution channels; financial and advisory support; development obstacles; economic viability; customer relations; cooperation patterns; and socio-demographic characteristics.

Both research projects received ethical approval from the Department of Sociology Committee on Research Ethics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, and were funded by the University of Zagreb. All participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymised during analysis and reporting. Our analytical approach integrated data from both projects to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges facing organic agriculture in Croatia, with particular attention to the role of associations. We employed deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021, 2024) guided by our theoretical framework on neo-endogenous development and civil society. Data analysis was facilitated by MAXQDA 2022 qualitative analysis software.

The analytical process involved several iterative stages. First, we imported and organised transcripts from both research projects, treating the first dataset (on individual producers) as contextual foundation for the second dataset (on associations). Second, we developed an initial coding framework based on our theoretical concepts and research questions. Third, we systematically coded all transcripts, allowing for emergent codes alongside our deductive framework. Finally, we identified patterns and relationships between codes, developing them into higher-order themes.

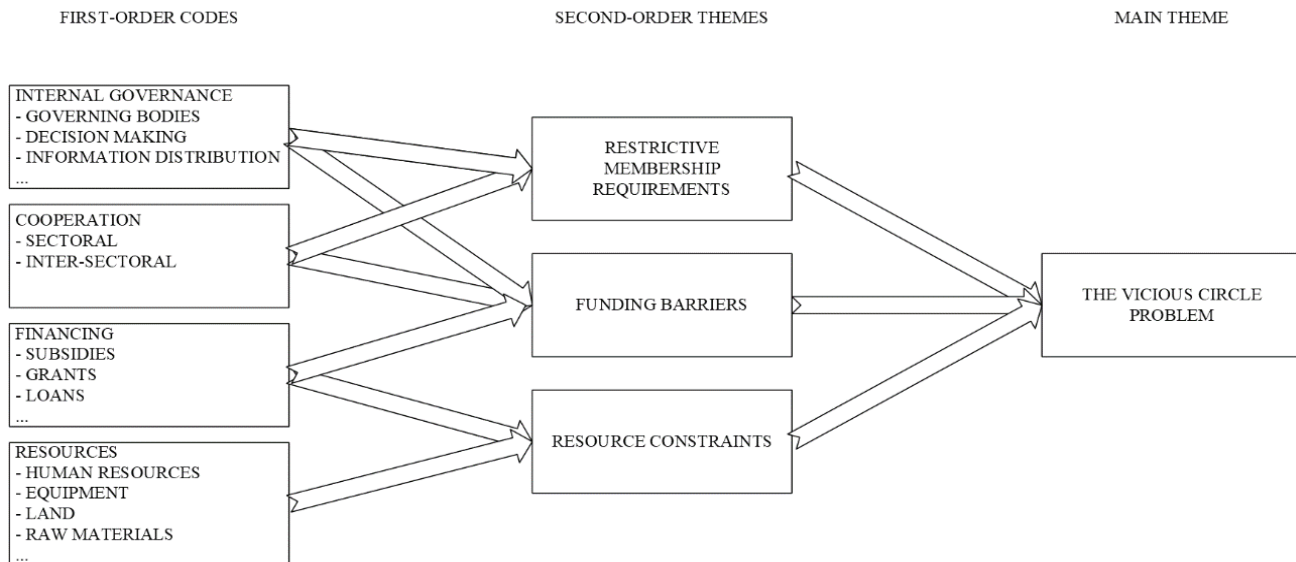
Coding was performed in two main rounds. The first round consisted of descriptive coding (Gibbs, 2007, Ch. 4), the main purpose of which was to identify what the participants were talking about. The first-order codes that emerged during this round largely corresponded to the groups of questions that were asked according to interview protocols. For example, as our research was guided by the conceptual framework of neo-endogenous development, considerable numbers of questions revolved around cooperation and networking at sectoral and inter-sectoral levels. This has been reflected in the first-order code 'cooperation' branching further into 'sectoral' and 'inter-sectoral' cooperation, and then further into codes denoting various forms of sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation, such as cooperation 'with(in) associations', 'with cooperatives and POs', 'with CSA groups', 'with LAGs', and so on (Figure 1).

The second round involved analytic coding (Gibbs, 2007, Ch. 4), which focused on identifying conceptual relationships between descriptive first-order codes. This process resulted in second-order themes, such as



'resource constraints', 'membership limitations', and 'funding barriers' (Figure 1). Further analysis revealed relationships between these themes that mutually reinforced one another and gave rise to a central organising concept that we termed 'the vicious circle problem' (Figure 1). This concept emerged organically from our data as we noticed recurring patterns across interviews, where participants described how their associations, formed to overcome individual limitations, encountered similar barriers at the organisational level.

Figure 1: Emergence of 'the vicious circle problem' as the main theme through the coding process



To ensure methodological rigour, we employed several validation strategies. The multiple-source design (individual producers and associations) allowed for triangulation of findings. We conducted member checks with key informants to verify our interpretations. Preliminary findings were presented at several scientific colloquia and professional meetings in Croatia for peer feedback. Throughout the analysis, we maintained reflexivity about our positionality as researchers and documented analytical decisions in memos.

We acknowledge that our own backgrounds influenced the research process. The lead author's previous experience in working with rural development initiatives provided valuable insights but also required careful reflection to avoid presuppositions. Our team includes both researchers with agricultural backgrounds and those with primarily social science expertise. Throughout the research process, we maintained dialogic reflexivity through regular team discussions about potential biases.

The recurring theme of funding barriers led us to supplement our interview data with targeted document analysis. Following the thematic analysis, we conducted desk research to systematically analyse eligibility criteria in public funding calls and tenders that had been identified by participants. We examined the official texts of funding opportunities mentioned in interviews ('Examples' column of Table 1, Appendix), focusing specifically on how these documents defined and positioned professional associations as potential applicants. This documentary analysis provided crucial institutional context for understanding the external constraints facing organic farmers' associations.

All interviews were conducted in Croatian, and the analysis was performed in the original language to preserve linguistic nuances. The author translated interview excerpts used in this paper into English. The translations were reviewed by a bilingual colleague to ensure accuracy.

Findings

In Croatia there are 2,874 certified organic family farms,³ which operate as micro-economic enterprises. For

³ Of 6,242 subjects certified in organic agriculture in Croatia, 2,874 are registered as family farms (Ministry of Agriculture, n.d.).

years many such farms have been functioning in a self-help mode (Božić and Srbljinović, 2021), established primarily in reaction to immediate needs of their founders and relying largely on their own resources to manage their labour-intensive profession. As one participant vividly described:

We're cooks, nutritionists, lab technicians, innovators. We have to do all that stuff of book-keeping and administration—it's all on us. (1, 17)⁴

A key challenge these farmers face is weak cooperation among producers, which limits their market power. A participant from a federation of associations explained:

We constantly keep cautioning the Ministry about this, that they have to make order at the vegetable market in Croatia, so that it's known who's doing what and how, what are the criteria for purchase and for fair play and all that. (1, 31)

Our research participants indicated that the market for organic agricultural products in Croatia lacks adequate infrastructure, notably national and local strategies, organic markets, and distribution channels in large retail chains—precisely the kind of extra-local connections that neo-endogenous development theory identifies as essential:

This way, producers themselves create the market, which is OK for small producers, but there is no growth that we all talk about, about some big areas, about some higher yields and larger quantities – there are no such things. When a small producer works for his or her sales stand, that's OK, but there is no development at the national level. (1, 16)

Due to this lack of higher-level market infrastructure, micro-entrepreneurs often rely exclusively on their own efforts, which support short supply chains and local markets but limit broader consumer reach:

We have our own stand right next to the farm, people pass by and come, they come to the farm itself (...) most people really come because they hear about us from someone. This person tells someone, then that person tells someone else, so it simply gets organised. (1, 23)

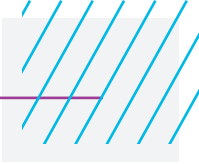
Large retail chains need product quantities and consistency that small Croatian organic producers can guarantee only by joining forces. The COFAA, registered in 2017 with 12 member associations, includes market development among its statutory objectives. However, the Alliance has not undertaken negotiations with large retail chains, primarily due to limitations in project financing and the lack of time among its volunteers.

In this context of fragmented individual efforts and weak market infrastructure, some organic farmers have recognised the need to move beyond the self-help model towards cooperation and networking, which micro-businesses necessarily need to reach larger markets. However, most micro-producers lack the managerial capacities for business expansion. They need connection with other producers and sectors, strategic resource management, and competencies to access European and national funding. Acquiring modern agricultural equipment requires applications to funding schemes that demand project design and management skills—precisely what these micro-entrepreneurs lack. Some of them have therefore initiated efforts towards various forms of sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation that exemplify the network-building central to neo-endogenous development.

Alternative Organisational Forms and Their Limitations

Following Parsons' differentiation model and Habermas' three spheres, we examined how various organisational forms attempt to mediate between economic, political, and civil society subsystems. Each form represents a different approach to overcoming the limitations of individual farming enterprises, yet they each encounter distinctive barriers that illuminate the broader structural challenges facing the sector.

⁴When citing research participants, the first number in parenthesis after each quote signifies whether the quote belongs to a participant from our research project 1 or research project 2 and the second number signifies the participant's ID.



Organisations such as cooperatives and POs could potentially link their member-farms' business processes, but few participants mentioned these forms, which remain underdeveloped in Croatian agriculture overall and nearly non-existent in organic agriculture. Cooperatives suffer from negative historical associations with the socialist era, despite their much longer pre-socialist history in Croatia (Božić et al., 2019, 2020). This historical shadow effectively forecloses what might otherwise be a natural organisational solution for small producers seeking collective market access.

Our research showed minimal involvement of organic producers and their associations in LAGs. While LAGs represent the EU's preferred vehicle for participatory rural development through the LEADER approach, Croatian organic farmers remain largely disconnected from these structures. Reasons include administrative hurdles, negative previous experiences, and perceived misalignment with producers' immediate needs (Božić and Srbljinović, 2021; Božić et al., 2022, 2025).

Studies from other countries, such as Italy, show that 'cultural' and 'environmental' associations readily join LAGs due to their ability 'to convey the wholeness of development, the need to synthesise and to take account of interdependencies' (Osti, 2002: 176). Croatian organic producers' associations, while partly 'environmental', primarily focus on agriculture, which may explain their limited LAG participation. CSA groups in Croatia represent an intriguing paradox within our analysis. Most participants reported some cooperation with CSA groups, which raise awareness about organic production. However, as informal entities that develop as a bricolage (Xu, 2025), CSA groups are typically neither eligible for EU funding nor interested in such applications. While these informal networks embody the bottom-up, citizen-led approach that neo-endogenous development advocates, their deliberate informality and counter-cultural orientation prevent them from accessing the resources needed for sector-wide impact. This illustrates how the tension between maintaining autonomy and accessing development resources manifests even in alternative organisational forms. The CSA example thus reinforces the fundamental challenge: how can organic farmers maintain their values-based approach while engaging with institutional frameworks designed for conventional actors? The Croatian CSA groups' experience reflects an unfortunate convergence of neo-liberal ideas about a non-interventionist state, with farmers' desire for autonomy, resulting in isolation from resources.

The limitations of these various organisational forms—cooperatives haunted by historical memories, LAGs perceived as bureaucratic and disconnected, CSAs choosing isolation over institutionalisation—illuminate why professional associations have emerged as the primary vehicle for collective action among Croatian organic farmers. Yet, these associations encounter their own structural constraints.

The Vicious Circle: Associations' Constraints and Limitations

For the purpose of scaling up, many organic farmers have established local organic farmers' associations. However, these associations themselves lack project design and management capacities, as their members are predominantly farmers with similar limitations. Most have zero employees due to resource constraints. As the literature indicates, associations in early development stages typically need public support (Archibugi, 2000), but such support has been largely insufficient in Croatia, particularly in structurally disadvantaged, 'left-behind' rural areas.

In practice, organic family farms have been trapped in a vicious circle where professional associations cannot help them develop further, undertake advocacy, or meaningfully engage with far more powerful actors from the industrial food system. This vicious circle exemplifies how the neo-endogenous approach fails when the balancing of local needs with external resources becomes disrupted by regulatory barriers which perpetuate rather than alleviate pre-existing structural inequalities and power imbalances. As one participant explained:

Tenders for the conservation of plant and genetic resources are meant for purchasing equipment. What do we need the equipment for? We need people who will work. On that programme they [public bodies] have people at their institutions who are already on the state budget, so they actually work part of their working

time for the programme for the preservation of plant and genetic resources. But nobody thinks that people in the associations are not on the state budget, they have no salaries, and they [public officials] expect things to be done. So the state should definitely have some of its own strategies (...) they [public bodies] should have programmes that would ensure some long-term sustainability if we are already doing something that is really important. (2, 14)

Regarding the Alliance's (COFAA) limitations, another participant commented:

We don't have any significant resources to take the Alliance to a higher level. We are equipped in such a way that we represent a mass of specific producers and the goal is to have some of our own voice in making some decisions at the level of the Ministry. There were a couple of meetings every year, but essentially these activities of the Alliance are reduced to the involvement of [the President] or one of us who finds something, then gets active, does something. It's far from what we'd like. Again, it's a matter of a lack of understanding by those who make laws and regulations. (2, 2)

Eligibility Constraints in Public Funding

The first component of the vicious circle stems from the state's failure to properly differentiate between types of CSOs in its funding mechanisms. Organic family farm associations find themselves in this vicious circle largely because they are categorised as professional associations, which are excluded from many public tenders meant for CSOs. In Croatia, public tenders range from those where professional associations are eligible applicants, to those where they can only be partner organisations, to those where they are entirely excluded. Table 1 (Appendix) illustrates these varying eligibility requirements.

One participant from the national umbrella association described this challenge:

We cannot be project applicants because we're a professional association and an umbrella organisation; they disqualify us based on that. (...) We have quite good cooperation with one other association. Considering that they also have members who are gardeners and citizens in general, they're actually the applicant organisation of the project, we're their partner organisation, which is kind of silly because the Alliance should be the one that carries such big projects, but we're in a situation where we always have to be someone's partner. (2, 1)

This quote reveals how the state's regulatory framework fails to recognise the distinctive public interest orientation of organic farmers' associations, treating them as equivalent to high-status professional associations that primarily serve member interests:

An agricultural association is specific because it's not just a professional organisation like the association of architects or this or that, it's simply related to life in rural areas; associations of family farms should be seen somehow differently. (2, 1)

In addition to their primary role as healthy food producers, organic farmers' associations engage in a variety of activities contributing to the public interest in environmental stewardship, including soil preservation and regeneration, seed saving and preserving biodiversity, and reducing pollution of soil, water and air by avoiding the use of chemicals in agricultural production. The public interest orientation of organic farmers and their associations is also conspicuous in underdeveloped rural areas where they often serve as public hubs for various community activities. For example, get-together events that organic farmers organise for their customers and other guests involve numerous villagers in various roles, such as cooks, food servers, guest assistants, farm tour guides and so on. At one such gathering, a neighbouring family provided a horse-drawn carriage to offer entertainment rides for children.

When the Croatian Ministry of Agriculture (2022), in one of its calls, spelt out that "[t]he right to apply to the Public Call does not apply to (...) professional associations that were founded with the sole aim of promoting and protecting the common interests of their members, that is, a certain profession", it was actually overlooking the fact that (organic) agricultural producer associations may have aims much wider than self-interest promotion.



Participants expressed the need for public and other donors to develop more nuanced eligibility criteria that recognised differences between types of professional association, considering factors such as public versus private interest orientation, profit versus non-profit orientation, and history of cooperation with other CSOs. This aligns with the recommendation that “[t]ailored funding constitutes an important component of the EU’s engagement with CSOs and should allow better access for local organisations” (European Commission, 2012: 10).

Restrictive Membership Requirements

The second component of the vicious circle stems from the associations’ own governance structures. Organic entrepreneur associations face limitations stemming from their own restrictive membership requirements. Most of them have constrained their membership criteria to give decision-making power exclusively to certified organic producers and exclude conventional agricultural producers. As one participant explained:

Somehow, they wanted that, if it’s an association of organic producers, then the majority of the membership should be made up of organic producers, and it’s up to each association whether it will include the sympathisers, one way or another, but the majority of the membership must be producers. (2, 1)

Of the 12 associations in the COFAA, two-thirds have membership categories where decision-making is restricted to core or regular members (certified organic producers), while one-third have more inclusive requirements. Associations in the first group typically restrict participation in governing bodies to regular members who must be registered organic agriculture producers. Physical and legal persons in other membership categories (supportive, associated, or honorary members) who are not registered organic producers cannot participate in association governance.

This creates a self-reinforcing loop that contradicts the network-building emphasis of neo-endogenous development theory. The associations’ engaged members all come from the same category of hard-working farmers who typically lack the managerial and application-writing competencies needed to break out of the vicious circle. By accepting only organic producers into core membership and restricting governance roles to this group, these associations limit their access to the very skills and networks that might help them overcome their limitations.

The dual constraints we have identified—external funding eligibility restrictions and internal membership limitations—reveal how organic farmers’ associations are caught in a paradoxical position. While they were formed to overcome the limitations of individual self-help approaches, they reproduce those same limitations at the collective level.

Discussion

Comparative Context: Learning from Neighbouring Success Stories

To better understand the specific constraints facing Croatian associations, it is instructive to examine how similar organisations function in neighbouring countries with more developed organic sectors, most notably Austria and Slovenia.

In Austria, organic agriculture is deeply institutionalised: approximately 26% of all farmland was certified organic by 2023, making Austria one of the leading EU countries in organic uptake (FiBL and IFOAM, 2024). Austrian organic producers benefit from a mature support ecosystem that includes public advisory services, well-established cooperatives, and robust national associations such as Bio Austria. The fact that these organisations are recognised as development agents and enjoy full access to both national and EU funding schemes reflects their public-good orientation, rather than them being confined to professional interest groups (Darnhofer, 2005; Stotten et al., 2018).

Slovenia, while smaller, has achieved above-EU-average conversion rates. In 2022, it had over 3,430 certified

organic farms—about 5–6% of total agricultural holdings—supported by both national policy alignment and regional LEADER-type initiatives. According to Schneider and Lysenkov (2022), Slovenian producer associations benefit from clear institutional categorisations and are routinely included in local and national funding frameworks, enabling active participation in multi-stakeholder rural development and agro-ecological programmes.

By contrast, Croatia's organic sector remains significantly less institutionalised, with only around 7.2% of farmland under organic production and with exclusionary or unclear categorisation of farmers' associations. Croatian producer groups are often ineligible for funding due to restrictive classification rules, even though they represent emerging rather than established sectors.

Unlike Slovenia and Austria, Croatia lacks consistent alignment between informal association structures and formal governance frameworks, a gap that reflects both post-socialist legacies and limited policy adaptability. The Ministry of Agriculture and other governmental bodies at national and local level seem to regard neither associations nor other organisations of organic producers as collective actors relevant to rural development. For example, the recent National Action Plan for the Development of Ecological Agriculture 2023 – 2030 pays too little attention to various associational forms in organic agriculture and does not even mention LAGs as vehicles of inter-sector networking (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). Whereas the aversion towards cooperatives may be regarded as a remnant of the Croatian socialist past, it is difficult to see why other associational forms have also been neglected. Unnecessary restrictions on eligibility of associations for public funding are just one aspect of such neglect (Božić et al., 2024).

These comparisons point to two critical differences: (1) institutional recognition—in Austria and Slovenia, organic associations are explicitly categorised as legitimate actors in rural development, and (2) policy integration—in both countries, producer associations are embedded in LEADER and multi-level governance structures, whereas Croatian associations remain organisationally marginalised.

These differences suggest that Croatia's challenges in fostering effective organic producer associations stem from regulatory design, institutional categorisation, and the absence of participatory development frameworks.

The Vicious Circle as a Negative Feedback Loop

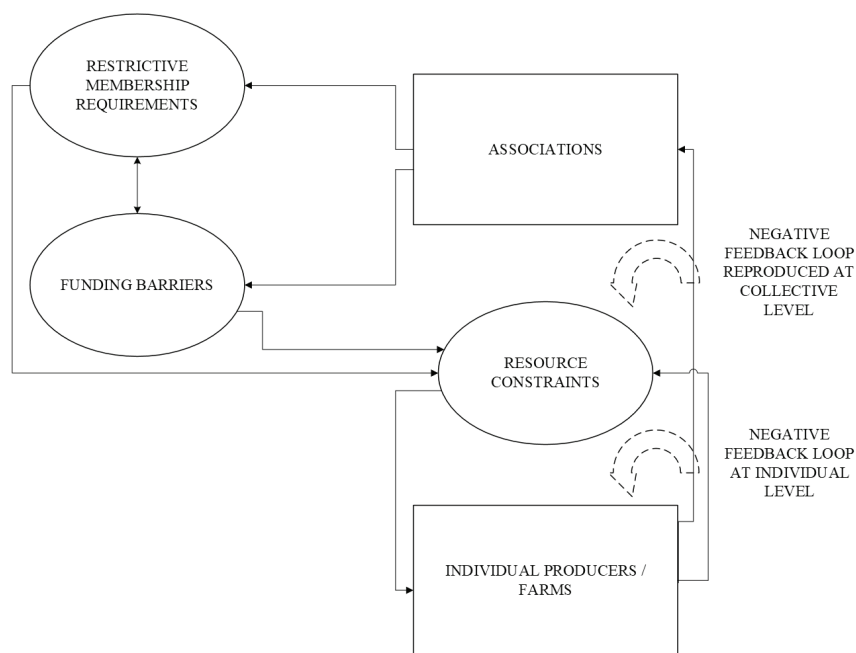
Our findings reveal a complex picture of how organic farmers' associations in Croatia are caught in the 'vicious circle of self-help development' through two interconnected constraints: external barriers to accessing funding due to their classification as professional associations, and internal limitations stemming from restrictive membership policies. In other words, a negative feedback loop due to resource constraints, first encountered at the level of individual producers, is reproduced again at the collective level (Figure 2).

Several unexpected findings emerged from our research. First, the extent to which official classification actively prevents organic farmers' associations from accessing resources was more pronounced than anticipated. As Rossi et al. (2024) show in the Italian context, such classifications often reproduce outdated hierarchies that marginalise emergent grassroots organisations. Similarly, in Croatia, the categorical exclusion from numerous funding opportunities represents a fundamental misrecognition of these organisations' societal role.

Second, we were surprised by the degree to which membership restrictions were formalised within association governance documents, creating structural barriers to including individuals with complementary skills who might help overcome resource limitations. The restrictive membership requirements of organic farmers' associations have simply been taken from the examples of already well-established, higher-status professions. However, while associational 'closure' works very well to protect the interests of higher-status professionals, in the case of small organic farmers such closure unnecessarily limits their networking opportunities. By accepting and encouraging the entrance into core membership not only of producers themselves, but also of other agents taking part in local and regional development, who are supportive of organic agriculture, these associations



Figure 2: Negative feedback loop at the individual and collective level



could enhance their chances of scaling up their members' enterprises. This would also contribute to achieving the associations' objectives, which are usually defined more broadly than food production only, encompassing awareness-raising among consumers and the public in general, knowledge preservation, rural development, nature conservation and other similar activities. Third, the rejection of other organisational forms (cooperatives, LAGs) was more pronounced than expected, leaving professional associations as virtually the only viable vehicle for collective action.

These findings highlight a paradoxical situation: the very organisational

form that organic farmers have gravitated towards, due to historical and cultural factors, is systematically disadvantaged by both external regulatory frameworks and internal governance choices. This is reminiscent of what Beingssner and Fletcher (2020) identify as 'capacity traps' in Canadian grain farming associations—situations where collectives are formed to overcome individual precarity but ultimately replicate those same limitations due to under-resourcing and restrictive governance practices.

Addressing the vicious circle requires interventions at multiple levels: regulatory reform, organisational development, and cultural change. By cultural change we mean a change in the public perception of professional associations of organic agriculture producers as not only promoting particular interests of their members, but also addressing common concerns, such as environmental wellbeing and community development.

Professional Associations and Public Interest: Theoretical Implications

The classification of organic farmers' associations as professional associations raises questions about how societies categorise and regulate different types of CSO. Drawing on Parsons' (2005) notion of differentiation, we can see that these associations occupy an ambiguous position at the intersection of multiple subsystems; they have economic functions (supporting members' livelihoods), societal community functions (building social capital in rural areas), and even cultural functions (preserving traditional farming knowledge).

This ambiguity creates tension when policy frameworks attempt to place these organisations neatly within established categories. As Habermas (1996) noted, the interpenetration of state, market, and civil society is both necessary and problematic. Our findings demonstrate how state regulations regarding funding eligibility can limit the development potential of organisations that do not fit neatly within established categories.

Our research participants suggest that these associations perform important public interest functions that distinguish them from more corporatist professional associations. They contribute to environmental sustainability, rural vitality, food security, and cultural preservation—all functions that align with broader societal goals beyond merely advancing members' economic interests. This supports Brown's (2016) contention that agricultural CSOs often balance private and public interests in complex ways that defy simple categorisation. Our findings contribute to on-going debates in the sociology of agriculture about the role of CSOs in sustainable rural development. While scholars have extensively examined farmers' cooperatives (Bijman et al., 2016) and alternative food networks (Goodman et al., 2012) as vehicles for rural development, professional associations of farmers have received comparatively little attention as development actors. This represents a

significant oversight, especially in the context of organic agriculture where these associations often serve as primary vehicles for collective action.

Viewed from the perspective of neo-endogenous development, the role of CSOs in development processes is indispensable (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019; Olmedo and O’Shaughnessy, 2023). In particular, CSOs should enable stronger bottom-up involvement of local communities in development processes. However, the bottom-up approach should not be “pushed from above through nudging, yet sold as output” (Zamfir, 2020: 53). The voice of local communities should be heard through citizen participation “as a tool to be improved to better answer to the local needs and to be involved in the decision-making process” (Zago et al., 2015: 19–20). Indeed, Lyson and Barham’s (1998: 565) findings suggest that “[a] system of sustainable agriculture that incorporates environmental, economic, and social aspects [...] rests on [...] family-organised operations and is nurtured in areas where civic engagement is high”.

Our research extends these insights by demonstrating how appropriate civil society structures are needed to enable meaningful civic engagement. The vicious circle we identify represents a significant barrier to the kind of civic engagement that Lyson and Barham (1998) identify as crucial for sustainable agriculture. This illustrates a key limitation in how neo-endogenous development has been conceptualised and operationalised, particularly in post-socialist contexts where civil society development follows trajectories that differ from those in Western Europe.

Network Structures and Institutional Contexts

The limitations of current organisational forms identified in our findings (cooperatives, LAGs, CSA groups) highlight the need for greater attention to institutional contexts in neo-endogenous development theory. While Granovetter’s (1985) concept of embeddedness emphasises how economic activity is situated within social networks, our findings suggest that these networks themselves are shaped by regulatory frameworks and historical legacies.

In Croatia, the historical association of cooperatives with socialist collectivisation has created cultural barriers to their adoption in organic agriculture (Novkovic and Golja, 2015). Similarly, LAGs—despite being promoted as vehicles for LEADER-inspired rural development—have struggled to engage organic producers due to administrative complexity and perceived disconnection from producers’ needs. These observations support Beckert’s (2006) critique of network analysis that fails to account for institutional contexts and cultural meanings.

Our findings on CSA groups further illustrate this point. While these informal networks enable direct producer-consumer connections, their counter-cultural orientation and reluctance to engage with formal funding mechanisms limit their capacity to drive broader sectoral development. This demonstrates how network formation is not merely a matter of creating connections, but is deeply influenced by actors’ values, historical experiences, and institutional contexts—factors often underemphasised in network-focused approaches to neo-endogenous development.

Breaking the Vicious Circle: Practical Implications

The dual constraints identified in our research—external funding eligibility limitations and internal membership restrictions—require different but complementary interventions. Our findings suggest that a more nuanced approach to categorising professional associations in funding frameworks would allow for better recognition of the public-interest functions performed by organic farmers’ associations in structurally disadvantaged rural areas. This aligns with the European Commission’s (2012) recommendation for ‘tailored funding’ that affords better access to local organisations.

Such tailoring suggests the need for more sophisticated eligibility criteria that consider factors such as an



association's contribution to the public good, its connection to rural development objectives, and its members' socioeconomic position. This would help distinguish between professional associations that primarily serve high-status professional groups, and those that support marginalised actors like small-scale organic farmers. Our findings simultaneously point to how associations themselves might reconsider their internal governance structures. By adopting more inclusive membership models that incorporate supporters with complementary skills (such as project management, marketing, or administration), associations could enhance their operational capacity while maintaining their core mission.

This dual approach illustrates how breaking the vicious circle requires action at multiple levels. It also demonstrates how neo-endogenous development in practice requires attention to specific regulatory mechanisms and organisational structures. The solutions require both top-down and bottom-up interventions, in this case changes in both national policy of funding CSOs and local CSOs' membership models. Our findings thus contribute to a more grounded understanding of how neo-endogenous development can be operationalised in structurally disadvantaged rural areas where CSOs face significant constraints.

Our findings also have broader implications for understanding rural development dynamics across the EU, particularly in newer member states with post-socialist legacies. The vicious circle we identify likely exists in similar forms in other countries where the institutional architectures governing CSOs were developed with limited consideration to how different types of professional association function in rural contexts. In countries like Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, where organic agriculture is also developing amidst complex institutional environments, professional associations may face comparable constraints (Augustyn and Nemes, 2014; Furmankiewicz et al., 2015).

The challenges we identify also relate to broader tensions in European rural policy implementation, where formal compliance with EU frameworks often masks substantive implementation challenges at local levels (Kováč, 2000; Maurel, 2008). As the EU continues to promote organic agriculture through its Farm to Fork Strategy (European Commission, 2020), understanding the organisational capacity constraints facing smallholder farmers (Omar and Hvarregaard Thorsøe, 2024) becomes increasingly important. Our conceptualisation of the 'vicious circle' provides an analytical framework for identifying similar institutional barriers in other contexts and informing more effective rural development policies.

Conclusion

This study has examined how professional associations of organic family farmers in Croatia navigate the complex terrain between private and public interests, and how their potential contribution to neo-endogenous rural development is constrained by both external and internal factors. Our research reveals that these associations are trapped in a 'vicious circle' where the very problems they were created to address—limited time, resources, and management capacity—continue to plague them at the collective level.

If this vicious circle is not addressed, the consequences for organic agriculture development in Croatia could be serious. The classification of organic farmers' associations as equivalent to high-status professional bodies could perpetuate underinvestment in a sector that Croatia is particularly well-positioned to develop. Recalling our initial description of farmers struggling alone with multiple responsibilities, we can see how this individual-level challenge is reproduced at the organisational level.

Our analysis makes three main contributions to current debates in the sociology of agriculture. First, it demonstrates how classification systems that determine eligibility for public funding create barriers to certain types of CSO. By being categorised as 'professional associations' alongside high-status professional bodies, organic farmers' associations face restricted access to resources, despite the important public-interest functions they perform. This challenges simplistic applications of differentiation theory that fail to account for

nuances within broad organisational categories.

Second, our study contributes to neo-endogenous development theory by highlighting the importance of institutional contexts and regulatory frameworks in shaping networks. Specific regulatory mechanisms—such as funding eligibility criteria and membership requirements—significantly determine whether development networks function effectively. This clarifies criticisms that network approaches are ‘under-socialised’ by documenting specific instances of the neglect of institutional contexts.

Third, our research offers insights into why certain models of rural organisation struggle in post-socialist settings despite their promotion in EU rural development policy. The historical association of cooperatives with forced collectivisation, the administrative complexity of LAGs, and the counter-cultural orientation of CSA groups contribute to their limited effectiveness as vehicles for organic sector development.

Based on these findings, we recommend two specific courses of action:

1. Funding frameworks should adopt more nuanced approaches to categorising professional associations, with specific criteria that recognise public-interest functions, territorial embeddedness, and development contributions.
2. Associations themselves should reconsider restrictive membership policies that limit their capacity to access complementary skills and resources. By opening core membership and governance roles to supportive non-farmers with relevant expertise, these associations could maintain their agricultural focus while addressing their internal capacity limitations.

Our findings on classification and internal governance resonate with cross-national evidence showing how administrative categories and internal organisational logics can reproduce power asymmetries within civil society itself (Beingessner and Fletcher, 2020; Rossi et al., 2024). This research presents a country case study whose validity should be further examined through comparative analyses in other countries, particularly those with post-socialist legacies. It would also be valuable to extend this research beyond organic farmers’ associations to conventional farmers’ associations and professional associations in other industries.

In conclusion, our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how CSOs can support sustainable rural development. It suggests that associations of micro-entrepreneurs in organic agriculture represent potentially valuable intermediaries in neo-endogenous development processes. However, realising this potential requires both the external regulatory constraints and internal organisational limitations to be addressed. The associations need better networking, among their members and with other stakeholders in rural development. Yet the associations need to be empowered enough to be able to grow the networks they need. The take-home message is clear: breaking the vicious circle requires both policy reform and organisational innovation, with a renewed appreciation of how professional associations in organic agriculture serve broader public interests while supporting their members’ economic activities.



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Appendix

Table 1: Eligibility of professional associations at public tenders and calls⁵

Tender/call category	Examples
Professional associations eligible as applicants	Ministry of Tourism and Sport (MTS, 2024) <i>Co-financing of associations' projects in tourism in 2024</i> European Social Fund – Operational Program Effective Human Resources 2014 – 2020 (ESF – EHR, 2014-2020) <i>Improving the access of vulnerable groups to the labour market in the tourism sector and hospitality II</i>
Professional associations eligible only as partner organisations	Ministry of Science and Education (MoSE, 2022) <i>Public tender for awarding grants to projects of associations in the field of non-institutional education of children and youth in the 2022/2023 school year</i>
Professional associations not eligible	Ministry of Agriculture (MoA, 2022) <i>Second public call for financing programs and projects of associations that promote agriculture and the value of the rural area of the Republic of Croatia for the year 2022:</i> '[t]he right to apply to the Public Call does not apply to (...) professional associations that were founded with the sole aim of promoting and protecting the common interests of their members, that is, a certain profession'
Established criteria for distinguishing professional associations as either eligible or ineligible	National Foundation for Civil Society Development (NFCSD, 2020) <i>Institutional support for the stabilization and development of associations (non-eligibility criteria):</i> 'professional and expert associations that were founded (among other goals) with the aim of promoting and protecting the common interests of their members, i.e. a certain profession (e.g. associations of doctors, judges, nurses and technicians, journalists, architects, biologists, etc.), that is, professional-research activities in the fields of application of certain branches of natural and social sciences, etc.; associations that provide support to stakeholders from the profit sector (e.g. small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, etc.) and only marginally involve cooperation with CSOs; associations whose founders are mostly legal entities from the profit sector'

⁵ References

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