Conference report

International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements – EU Regional Group

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Agro-ecology and consumption change can secure future food supply

Food security in times of scarce natural resources requires an ecological re-think of our food and farm systems

Brussels, 10/11/2011 – Food systems must become more sustainable, reduce the use of external inputs and improve nutrient recycling to secure a sufficient food supply for future generations. Organic farming is already many steps ahead on this path. This was the overall message of the IFOAM EU Resource Efficiency conference held on Wednesday[i].

Martin Häusling, coordinator of the Greens/EFA Group for agriculture, opened the conference with a wake-up call to Europe's growing foreign protein dependence. "From climate change to animal welfare concerns, large-scale protein production overseas for the domestic rearing of livestock is a formula which just does not add up, neither environmentally, nor socially or economically," stated Häusling. "We must rediscover our own legumes." This was complemented by **Walter Pengue** from the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento in Buenos Aires: "Industrial soy cultivation has devastating effects on long-term soil fertility in Argentina. The cultivation of GMO-soya is especially harmful to the environment and since the introduction of herbicide-resistant GMO-soya, the use of Glyphosate has increased 200 times."

Vesna Valant, from the Cabinet of Environment Commissioner Potočnik, expanded on the Commission's resource-efficiency plans in terms of agriculture, highlighting that Europe wastes 90 million tonnes of food each year. To reduce this number will require efforts throughout the food chain. Regarding farming inputs, she particularly highlighted the issue of phosphorus. Serious scarcity problems are predicted for this mineral in the future, so approaches will have to be assessed to recycle and efficiently use this resource[ii].

The first session was rounded off by **Carlo Leifert** from the University of Newcastle. He underlined that the current level of conventional production will quickly fall if one nutrient runs out[iii]. "Inputs in fertilisers and pesticides have increased in the last years in significantly higher rates than average yields – thus input efficiency has decreased. Levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are dwindling fast, with some estimates predicting the end of the line to be reached within 30 to 40 years. Organic farming is a pioneer in resource efficiency: it does not only recycle more nutrients, but also reduces loss and pollution to the environment. There is also considerable yield potential still for organic by using more locally-adapted varieties."

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The second session focused on research needs to meet the resource efficiency challenge. It was opened by **Erik Mathijs** from the Catholic University of Leuven and author of the 3rd SCAR Foresight Exercise[iv]. He asserted that the productivity narrative which puts emphasis on the target to produce "more with less" was still the dominant discourse in the policy debate, even around the resource efficiency initiative. Decoupling of growth from resource use was disclosed as a myth; he suggested the "sufficiency narrative" as alternative, with the underlying slogan of "less is more", pleading for measures such as the internalisaton of external costs of production.

Focusing in on the complexities of one single nutrient in agriculture, the presentation by **Mark Sutton** from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and lead author of the European Nitrogen Assessment[v] outlined the dramatic costs of nitrogen pollution estimated at €70–€320 billion per year in the EU-27, of which 75% is related to air pollution effects and 60% to human health. Next to technical improvements in manure application, he highlighted the need to reduce luxury food consumption.

Szilvia Nemeth from DG Research and Innovation, European Commission, underlined the need for a coherent policy framework to advance innovation in the food sector. She presented the knowledge-based bio-economy initiative and the role it can play in improving on carbon emissions and sustainability of food systems. She emphasised the essential role of technological and social innovation in the food sector to reduce food waste and to create new links among different stakeholders in the food chain.

Susanne Padel, member of the TP Organics steering group and principal researcher at Organic Research Center, closed the round of afternoon presentations, saying that "thinking out of the box" is most important to come to innovation. She explained that organic agriculture has proven to be an innovative sector, showing several examples of projects advancing innovation in livestock and land management as well as consumer-producer relationships. The exchange between researchers and farmers is an essential source of progress – participatory research approaches must be conducted to ensure that the innovation potential of farmer knowledge is taken into consideration.

The conference **"**Resource Efficiency and Food Security – Opportunities and challenges for sustainable food systems", organised by the IFOAM EU Group[vi] in cooperation with the Committee of Regions, TP Organics and MEP Martin Häusling delivered an important and timely contribution to the growing resource efficiency discussion. With the recently-published Roadmap for a resource-efficient Europe[vii] by the Commission in September firing the starting signal for the EU's future environmental endeavours, all areas from transport to fisheries will now be measured against the backdrop of resource efficiency parameters.

All presentations of the conference will be available on this website soon.

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[i] Conference: Resource Efficiency and Food Security - Opportunities and challenges for sustainable food systems, 9th November 2011, Brussels;

[ii] The Commission Roadmap to a resource efficient Europe (COM (2011)571: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/resource_efficiency/pdf/com2011_571.pdf) announces the publication of a Green Paper on Phosphorus for 2012.

[iii] Liebig's Law of the Minimum states that growth of plants is controlled not by the total amount of resources available, but by the scarcest resource (limiting factor). This rule is still today state of science.

[iv] European Commission – Standing Committee on Agricultural Research (SCAR): The 3rd SCAR Foresight Exercise Sustainable food consumption and production in a resource-constrained world (February 2011): http://ec.europa.eu/research/agriculture/scar/pdf/scar_feg3_final_report_01_02_2011.pdf

[v] The European Nitrogen Assessment was the first of its kind to measure and quantify nitrogen streams in Europe. It can be found under http://www.nine-esf.org/ENA.

[vi] The IFOAM EU Group represents more than 300 member organisations of IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) in the EU-27, the EU accession countries and EFTA. Member organisations include: consumer, farmer and processor associations; research, education and advisory organisations; certification bodies and commercial organic companies.

[vii] One of the seven flagship initiatives of the EU 2020 strategy is resource efficiency: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:DKEY=6