

Shaping Agriculture and Food Systems to Future Challenges

The Strategic Role of Organic Food and Farming

HOW THE EU CAN PROFIT FROM ORGANIC SYSTEMS TO ACHIEVE MULTIPLE POLICY GOALS

Recommendations to the new European Commission and the European Parliament
for a coherent framework of policies to support organic food and farming

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PUBLISHED AND EDITED BY



WORKING FOR ORGANIC FOOD
AND FARMING IN EUROPE



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Printed on Cyclus print paper
Download of electronic version from www.ifoam-eu.org
BRUSSELS December 2009/amended May 2010

Acknowledgements to the European Community, DG Environment, which has supported the production of this study through LIFE+ co-financing for 2009/2010. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of IFOAM EU Group and DG Environment cannot be made responsible for it in any way.

Executive Summary

Today's policymakers face severe challenges, and the food production system is at the heart of many of them. Perhaps the most serious is the global ecological crisis: we see the earth's ecosystems becoming unstable, with the risk of triggering non-linear, abrupt environmental change on a vast scale, even on a planetary scale. There is now evidence that the ecosystem parameters of climate, biodiversity and the global nitrogen cycle have moved out of their safe ranges. These areas are strongly impacted by food production. The environmental deterioration occurring in the wake of modern agricultural practices is well-documented by a series of high-profile international reports and the need to develop truly sustainable food systems is starkly evident.

The challenges ahead are of unprecedented scale and complexity. It is of utmost importance that policymakers recognise this and acknowledge that simplistic linear approaches will fail us. There is a need instead intelligently to plan and manage food production through systems-oriented solutions that take account of interactions at multiple levels and of diversity in ecologies, economies and cultures.

Organic food production systems could be a powerful tool for policymakers and society. They can be thought of as a multi-targeted approach to food production, since they deliver simultaneous benefits to multiple stakeholders. Organic production is the only production system clearly defined and legislated by Regulation (EC) 834/2007 at EU level aiming to “establish a sustainable management system for agriculture” that “respects nature's systems and cycles,” producing high quality foods in ways that “do not harm the environment, human health, plant health or animal health and welfare.” Sometimes the organic approach can be outperformed by other approaches with respect to single factors considered in isolation, but organic farming as a system is grounded in balancing multiple factors for an optimised overall solution; and comprehensive approaches are necessary if we do not want to risk to find a single solution for one problem on the expense of worsening another problem.

Organic production can thus play a strategic role as a leading sustainable food system that offers, as it were, a ‘learning camp for sustainability,’ generating knowledge, technologies and practices relevant for other food production systems. **The strategic role of organic production goes far beyond the benefits provided by organic the food system** itself and can be summarized as the following:

- Organic production is a holistic approach based on a whole-systems understanding rather than linear “one problem – one solution” approach and represents an optimised form of multifunctional agriculture, delivering both marketed and non-marketed ecosystem services.
- Organic production as the benchmark for sustainability of agricultural methods drives progress across the agricultural sector by stimulating creative competition and improved sustainability in all food systems.

- The organic sector is highly innovative and has produced many smart and green technologies. Restrictions on inputs and methods drive innovation, making organic systems into creative living laboratories. Approaches and techniques developed within the organic system are often easily transferrable to other food and farming systems.
- Organic production has received relatively little investment but has nonetheless been extraordinarily successful. Potential is there for the sector to deliver tremendous benefits with more support.
- Organic production can facilitate the development of low-carbon and resource-efficient food systems. Modern food production's dependence on fossil fuels and other inputs with limited availability such as phosphorus highlights the necessity of 'transition farming' practices which will enable food production with reduced external inputs, increasing resource- efficiency and developing superior nutrient cycles.
- Organic science embraces technological change and monitors new agricultural and agro-ecological technologies, integrating them if appropriate and in line with the organic principles, but taking a precautionary approach. The sector therefore offers a low-risk alternative to other food systems and can be a valuable resource for policymakers interested in ensuring safety of technological advances.

Organic production is also directly relevant to a series of EU policy objectives. In providing a framework for future-oriented food systems, it can and will deliver to the overall **EU 2020 strategy** for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth towards a greener, more resource-efficient and more competitive economy. It will also contribute to the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy.

Environmental and ecological benefits are foremost among the strengths of organic farming. Organic farming as an agro-environmental policy instrument is particularly useful where the goal is overall improvement of a large number of environmental indicators; in such instances its comparatively low transaction costs are a distinct advantage. It has very high potential to improve the EU's overall performance with respect to biodiversity protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation, soil protection, and sustainable use of pesticides and water. Further, organic fits well to EU efforts and strategy to increase animal welfare.

Organic as the lead market for high quality, high value foods and the most successful quality scheme in existence should be regarded as essential to increasing and maintaining the competitiveness and profitability of the EU's agri-food sector. Support for the organic sector can generate exciting results for rural development, greatly strengthening the role of agriculture. The sector is highly innovative, creating green business models and economic opportunities. Organic farms frequently engage in value-added activities such as direct marketing, processing and eco-tourism.

Organic food and farming can support EU's efforts to encourage healthier and more sustainable diets and eating habits. Organic products face strict limitations on the processing methods, product technologies, processing aids and additives and might have certain advantages as regards vitamins and health-promoting secondary metabolites. As such, the organic label is a mark of authentic food

with high ethical value.

Organic can also be a strong tool in EU development policies. As a production method, it promotes higher food security and its promotion in developing countries offers low-income farmers a less resource-intensive, less input-intensive system which not only improves long-term productivity of natural resources but also provides a greater range of foods for local consumption and higher-value export commodities.

Organic food systems should be seriously considered by EU policymakers as a resource to achieve progress on a range of major issues. The EU's current policy environment does not harness the full potential of organic agriculture for the Community economically, environmentally and socially. The requirement now is for serious and courageous decisions to establish a coherent framework and a mix of bold policy measures that can allow the EU to exploit the full range of benefits provided by organic production.

In this context, the IFOAM EU Group welcomed the 2004 EU Organic Action Plan, but emphasizes that the moment has come to redefine the strategic role of organic food and farming within EU policies taking into account fresh political challenges, the changed political environment and the new financial period ahead (2014 to 2020). The IFOAM EU Group proposes not necessarily a new EU Organic Action Plan, but instead a more coherent policy framework to support the organic sector and maximise its benefits to the community. The following key areas of actions are identified:

- Set a political target of 20 percent land area under organic management by 2020.
- Acknowledge organic as a holistic approach for effective multifunctional food production and thus integrate organic production into cross-cutting policy fields.
- Acknowledge organic as the successful outcome of a bottom-up approach to creating a pioneering voluntary positive labelling scheme, and enhance transparent public-private partnerships to develop organic production. Acknowledge the innovative character of the organic private sector and private standards.
- Enhance education, training and exchange of knowledge between farmers and small operators in processing, retailing and trade.
- Design the new CAP to deliver a clearly targeted system of support measures that increases sustainability in farming. Aim for comprehensive agricultural systems that deliver on all aspects of sustainability. Organic farming as a comprehensive approach must be given a central role as a model and best practice measure. Support for organic farming must become mandatory within the CAP.
- Make full use of the potential of organic farming to halt climate change, biodiversity loss, soil degradation and water depletion in relevant cross cutting EU legislation, strategies and initiatives.

- Enhance agro-biodiversity through relevant legislation and improved market access in the seed industry. Establish adequately financed ten-year breeding programmes for locally adapted and organic plant varieties and animal breeds.
- Safeguard the ability of the organic food chain to stay free of GMO contamination; reduce the economic costs of contamination.
- Promote organic food and farming throughout the EU by a range of methods.
- Improve collection of statistical data on the organic sector.
- Ensure a consistent policy on product quality and food labelling to maintain the credibility of quality labels. This refers also to the avoidance of competing labels that confuse consumers and undermine the credibility of other labels. Strengthen legal standards across the various areas of agriculture and food production (such as animal welfare) through EU-wide binding legislation.
- Boost sustainable innovation through an organic research programme of at least 150 million Euros in the 8th Framework Programme. Grant official recognition to the research technology platform TP Organics and address its identified research needs in EU and transnational research programmes.
- Prioritise sustainable and holistic agricultural models such as organic farming to achieve food security by guaranteeing careful use of natural resources and maintenance of agro-genetic resources in European development policies related to food production.
- Ensure policy coherence regarding the promotion of sustainable consumption models. Capture the potential of organic farming for healthy, local and authentic foods.
- Further develop the Organic Regulation (EC) 834/2007 through its 2011 review, addressing its scope, technical annexes and harmonised implementation. Maintain and strengthen the credibility of organic food and farming through improved supervision of competent authorities, improved control procedures and tools which complement the implementation of standards and which can be managed by the private sector as codes of conduct.
- Enhancing support to smallholders in organic production worldwide. Work in close collaboration with IFOAM on the development of strategies and activities related to international trade in organic products and profit from IFOAM and IOAS's leadership and expertise in international standard-setting and assessments.





The IFOAM EU Group is the European working level within the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements. It brings together more than 340 organisations, associations and enterprises from all EU-27, EFTA and candidate countries. IFOAM's goal is the worldwide adoption of ecologically, socially and economically sound systems that are based on the principles of Organic Agriculture.