

Definition of Organic Agriculture Report to the Task Force

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I. BACKGROUND

At the General Assembly 2005 the Task Force (TF) on the Principles of Organic Agriculture (POA) was asked to formulate a Definition of Organic Agriculture (DOA). It was agreed by the World Board (WB) that the definition would adhere to the following criteria:

- Short / concise [limit in words e.g. 300]
- Positive as opposed to normative (which is the form in which the POA are formulated)
- Positive as opposed to negative (what Organic Agriculture (OA) is NOT or does NOT use)
- Covers the full diversity of OA in the world
- No specific reference to certification (in line with position on full diversity of OA)
- Based on and tested against POA

A work plan for the creation of the DOA was devised. The first step was to collect and analyze existing definitions to provide a basis for the TF. Definitions were collected from five main sources:

- Definitions of OA from the public (on the internet)
- Definitions of OA in regulations (on the internet)
- Definitions of OA in past IFOAM publications
- OA-related definitions (on the internet)
- Definitions of OA submitted from IFOAM members

II. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

a. Methods

In order to analyze the definitions, the POA were used as a guide to identify common elements in the definitions. Each analyzed definition was broken into parts, which were called “element expressions”. Each element expression was then assigned a specific “principle element”: CARE, ECOLOGY, FAIRNESS, or HEALTH. An OUTSIDE category was also created which applied to elements not present in the principles (e.g. certification).

Where applicable, the element expressions were further broken down into sub-categories of each element (e.g. biodiversity and soil were sub-categories of ECOSYSTEM). This enabled the organization, grouping, and counting of common elements.

b. Analysis Issues

Seeing that the POA are interwoven, it was difficult to isolate the elements, and hence apportion them accurately. For example, does mention of soil, nutrient cycles, and microbial activity come under the HEALTH principle (as it states “OA should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible”) or does it come under ECOLOGY (as it states “OA should be based on living ecological systems...in the case of crops this is the living soil.”)

The approach taken to address this issue was threefold. First, the analysis was applied as consistently as possible (e.g. specific mention of soil was mostly delegated to HEALTH).

Second, wherever possible, the expression elements were analyzed in their whole form by assigning the main idea a principle element, rather than “over-processing” by breaking the expressions down into less meaningful components. For example, “future,” referring to sustainability over the long term, was apportioned to the appropriate principle element depending on the context of the “future” statement.

Third, and perhaps most important, was the recognition that the POA are interconnected. As such, the end result can be trusted in that the same commonalities between definitions are evident, but perhaps just in a different way (e.g. through a different expression within the POA). After all, the strength of the analyses partly lies in the “whole-thought” cross referencing of the POA.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTIONS

a. Definitions of Organic Agriculture from the Public

Purpose: To determine the public view of what OA is
To determine what is missing/lacking from the public view

Method: cursory internet search. 5 definitions were found. No submissions were delivered by the general public.

Example:

“Organic farming is a form of agriculture that relies on ecosystem management and attempts to reduce or eliminate external agricultural inputs, especially synthetic ones. It is a holistic production management system that promotes and enhances agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. In preference to the use of off-farm inputs, organic farming emphasizes management practices, taking into account that regional conditions require locally adapted systems. Utilizing both traditional and scientific knowledge, organic agricultural systems rely on agronomic, biological, and mechanical methods (these may require external inputs of nonrenewable resources, like tractor fuel), as opposed to using synthetic materials, to fulfill any specific function within the system. Organic farming is also associated with support for principles beyond cultural practices, such as fair trade and environmental stewardship, although this does not apply to all organic farms and farmers“.

-Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organic_agriculture

Observations:

- There is no definition of “Organic Agriculture” in a cursory internet dictionary/ encyclopedia search: only organic, organic food, and organic farming. One definition even notes that “at present, there is no universally accepted definition of *organic food*”.
- Mis/non-information exists in the public definitions (e.g. “that organic farming “usually subscribes to the principles of sustainable agriculture“).

- 5/5 definitions include HEALTH relating to the exclusion/avoidance/attempt to reduce “inputs”. There is not, however, a common way of expressing this.
- 2/5 definitions refer to CARE, the exclusion of GE (but one notes that not all definitions of organic refer to this).
- 2/5 talk about ECOLOGY.
- 1/5 talks about FAIRNESS in terms of fair-trade but with the disclaimer that this does not apply to all practitioners.
- 1/5 refers to certification.
- 1/5 refers to the principles of “sustainable agriculture”.
- 2/5 draw comparisons to conventional agriculture.
- The principle elements of ECOLOGY, FAIRNESS and CARE are missing from 3/5 definitions - they are shadowed by the “input” element.

Conclusions:

There is a place for a definition of OA in its broad sense in the public domain (it has not yet been defined).

There is an opportunity for the DOA to clarify mis/non-information that exists in the public domain of OA.

The public’s interpretation of HEALTH is negative. The DOA may serve to clarify OA’s relationship to health in a positive way.

b. Definition of Organic Agriculture in Regulations

Purpose: To identify existing legal definitions and analyze their elements.
To understand a possible endpoint for the IFOAM definition (i.e. can the definition be taken into the legal framework of a regulation?)

Method: Internet search. 10 references were found: Australia, Canada (not yet regulation), Codex, EU, India, Japan, Peru, Philippines, and USA (2).

Example:

“Organic Agriculture is one among the broad spectrum of methodologies which are supportive of the environment. Organic production systems are based on specific and precise standards of production which aim at achieving optimal agroecosystems which are socially, ecologically and economically sustainable...”

-Codex Foreword, http://www.codexalimentarius.net/web/index_en.jsp

Observations:

- The definitions have the focus of “organic production”; any mention of OA comes in forewords, preambles, and unofficial policy. Currently, it is not within the scope of government regulation to provide a concise definition of OA. The regulation at length is what legally defines OA, or more precisely what can be labeled as coming from “organic production”.
- The Codex definition appears in others (e.g. Canada, US National Organic Standard Board, Wikipedia (public) definition).
- An IFOAM definition is references in one (Philippines).
- 1/10 definitions include all four principle elements (Codex).
- 9/10 definitions include ECOLOGY (EU does not).
- 8/10 definitions include HEALTH, 5 of these refer to input regulation, 2 to avoiding pollution.
- 3/10 definitions refer to FAIRNESS (economic sustainability, animal welfare).
- 2/9 definitions refer to CARE .
- 4/9 definitions go outside the scope of POA and refer to standards/regulation.
- On average, definitions have 2 of the principle elements, and 5 expression elements.

Conclusions:

There may be the opportunity for the DOA to appear in the preambles/forewords of regulations, or perhaps even the regulations themselves. Already, the Philippines’ National Organic Agriculture Program makes explicit reference to an IFOAM definition of OA. Emerging markets and regulations may be an especially pertinent opportunity (e.g. Canada).

The DOA may try to clarify OA as being more than what is currently portrayed in regulations (e.g. as being “part of a broad spectrum of methodologies” and merely “supportive of the environment” (Codex).

c. Definitions of Organic Agriculture from Past IFOAM Publications

- Purpose:** To locate usage of the definition in existing publications as a potential endpoint for the new definition.
To analyze the most recent definition for its elements.

Method: Search IFOAM publications for definitions, and organize into analysis framework. 11 references to OA were found.

Example:

“Organic agriculture, as defined by IFOAM, includes all agricultural systems that promote environmentally, socially and economically sound production of food and fibers. Recycling nutrients and strengthening natural processes helps to maintain soil fertility and ensure successful production. By respecting the natural capacity of plants, animals and the landscape, it aims to optimize quality in all aspects of agriculture and the environment. OA dramatically reduces external inputs by refraining from the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, Genetically Modified Organisms and pharmaceuticals. Pests and diseases are controlled with naturally occurring means and substances according to both traditional as well as modern scientific knowledge, increasing both agricultural yields and disease resistance. OA adheres to globally accepted principles, which are implemented within local socio-economic, climatic and cultural settings. As a logical consequence, IFOAM stresses and supports the development of self-supporting systems on local and regional levels”.

-IFOAM Directory 2005 (most recent)

Observations:

- No definition of OA appears in the Norms; only Organic, Organic Product, Organic Seed, and Plant Material.
- IFOAM’s definition refers to “globally accepted principles.”
- The definitions are very interrelated, with many phrases showing more than one element, reflecting the “interwovenness” of the POA.
- There is a strong representation of FAIRNESS, more so than in the other categories of definitions (e.g. regulations, public).
- *In terms of the most recent example (2005)*
 - All four principle elements are present.
 - 13 Element Expressions in total
 - 2 references to CARE, 1 of them GE
 - 2 references to ECOLOGY
 - 4 references to FAIRNESS
 - 4 references to HEALTH, 1 of them “inputs”
 - 1 reference to OUTSIDE (increased yields)

Conclusions:

There is a need for a DOA in the IFOAM Norms.

d) Organic Agriculture-Related Definitions

Purpose: To identify misconceptions & how OA differs from other definitions.

Method: Internet Search of “Sustainable Agriculture,” “Ecological Agriculture,” and “Conservation Agriculture” definitions, application of analysis framework to related definitions. 3 definitions found for Sustainable Agriculture, and 2 each for the others.

Example:

“Sustainable agriculture describes farming systems that are capable of maintaining their productivity and usefulness to society indefinitely. Such systems must be resource-conserving, socially supportive, commercially competitive, and environmentally sound.”

-Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, 1990

Observations:

Sustainable Agriculture

- FAIRNESS in terms of economic viability is a focus in sustainable agriculture
- ECOLOGY was not a focus (although some definitions referred to natural cycles).
- HEALTH and CARE do not appear.

Ecological Agriculture

- Focuses on ECOLOGY, however, in a different way from the OA definitions (agriculture is optimized so that ecological systems can be left in tact)
- HEALTH, FAIRNESS, and CARE do not appear.

Conservation Agriculture

- Focuses on HEALTH, but only in the sense of maintaining healthy soil.
- FAIRNESS and CARE do not appear.

Conclusions:

Compared to the other definitions, OA appears to be more holistic in that it incorporates ECOLOGY, HEALTH, CARE, and FAIRNESS. The DOA will need to differentiate itself from the other definitions to dispel the conception that it is closely linked to them (e.g. reference.com states that OA “subscribes to the principles of sustainable agriculture”). To accomplish this, it may be necessary for the DOA to have equal focus on all four principles.

e) Definitions of Organic Agriculture submitted from IFOAM Members

Purpose: To receive input from the membership as to how OA should be defined.

Method: Email call, notices in IFOAM communications, reminders and thank-yous to all submitters. Compilation into analysis framework, identification of elements. 36 definitions submitted.

Example:

“Organic Agriculture is a sustainable farming system that embraces environmentally, socially and economically sound production methods for food, fibers and livestock, recycling nutrients and strengthening natural processes that help to control pests and diseases, and maintain long term soil fertility to ensure successful production. Organic Agriculture excludes synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs)”.

-Organic Producers and Processors of Zambia

General Observations:

- 72% of the submissions came from Members (including 1 staff and 1 WB member)
- 28% came from non-Members, but otherwise organically-involved people.
- The submissions came from 26 different countries: Austria, China, Columbia (2), France, Germany (3), Honduras, India (5), Indonesia, Italy (2), Kenya, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, Moldova, Nepal, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines (2), Romania, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland (2), Uganda, UK, Zambia.
- Submissions ranged from individuals representing their personal convictions, to an organization’s official definition, to the results of broader consultation.
- 16% of the definitions included all four elements. All the definitions included at least 1 of the principle elements. On average, each definition included 2 principle elements.

78% mention ECOLOGY
 53% mention CARE
 50% mention HEALTH
 47% mention FAIRNESS
 33% contain elements outside of the POA

- Within the 36 definitions a total of 173 elements were identified:
 45% mention ECOLOGY
 20% mention FAIRNESS
 14% mention HEALTH
 13% mention CARE
 9% mention OUTSIDE elements

Observations on the Specific Elements:

ECOLOGY

The most often cited element. The definitions that mentioned ECOLOGY often went on to elaborate and illustrate the meaning of ecology. For the purposes of this analysis, the ECOLOGY element was broken down into further sub-categories (as listed in the ECOLOGY table). For this reason ECOLOGY was often “double-counted,” but only to reflect how often it is mentioned in the submissions.

ECOLOGY
27 Ecosystem
7 Soil/Nutrient cycles
6 Biodiversity
6 Methods
5 Holistic
5 Conservation/resources
4 Local/Adapted
3 Production (optimum)
3 Pest/Disease Control
3 Local Resources
3 Future
3 Energy (low)
1 Energy (renewable)
1 Efficiency
77 ecology related elements in total

CARE

There were 23 elements identified as CARE. The most common sub-category listed for CARE was knowledge (52%), followed by the exclusion/reduction of GE organisms (17%).

CARE
12 Knowledge
4 Genetically Engineered (GE)
2 Future
2 Safe food, safe methods
1 Fragility of planet, the need to protect
1 Input optimization (benefit) as opposed to output maximization (exploit)
23 care related elements in total

HEALTH

There were 24 elements identified as HEALTH. Just under half of these related to the exclusion (or other) of certain inputs, as elaborated on in the HEALTH table. Ecology and soil are elements mentioned here that strongly overlap with ECOLOGY.

The way to express “exclusion” varies, as does how to refer to inputs (e.g. chemical, synthetic, or unnatural). This reveals the lack of clarity within the movement itself, based on a distinction that is not clear cut, even in the Standards.

HEALTH	
10	Inputs
7	Excludes
1	Generally avoids/largely excludes
1	Significantly reduces
6	fertilizers/synthetic
4	pesticides
3	feed additives/hormones/growth regulators
1	antibiotics
1	chemical inputs
1	forbidden inputs
1	synthetics
5	Ecology
3	Soil
3	Non-polluting
2	Life
1	Food
24 health related elements in total	

FAIRNESS

There were 34 elements identified as FAIRNESS. Future, ecosystem and stewardship overlap strongly with the other elements.

FAIRNESS	
7	Economic
4	Quality of life
4	Quality products
3	Animal welfare
3	Social
2	Equity
2	Future
2	Life opportunities
2	sovereignty
2	sufficient
1	Ecosystem
1	Respect
1	Stewardship
34 fairness related elements in total	

OUTSIDE

The 15 elements identified as outside are summarized in the “Outside” table. The most common OUTSIDE element was that OA is a “belief,” a “way of life,” or “being.” This was classified as being outside because it is relative to the person, and is not inclusive of the diversity of OA.

OUTSIDE	
Sub-Category	Reason for being listed as “other”
5 belief/way of life/being	relative, not inclusive
2 paradigm shift	not inclusive
2 list of products	specific
2 vegetarianism	not inclusive
1 decentralized input supply	sovereignty?
1 development	ideology
1 low food processing	efficient?
1 principle of sustainable development	different ideology
15 Outside elements in total	

Observations on the Comments Provided:

Eight comments were provided along with the submitted definitions.

- 3/8 comments mentioned that their perception of OA is quite different from the Standards (to be taken up by the IFOAM Basic Standards Revision).
- 1 individual requested that real examples be given, that the definition be non-abstract, and that the definition be based on the farmer’s perspective.
- 1 suggested the term Organiculture.
- 1 suggested more work in Developing Countries.
- There was also this insight given:
 “It is not the defining rather understanding the Nature’s system of production and recycling in which every living being including human being is just to get as well as return his/her share. Making a cage of definition with some words is looks like we are trying to limit/control nature that is not possible till date. Nature is a dynamic system therefore one definition will not be long lasting.”

Conclusions

By the analysis, and based on the “frequency” of the four Principle elements, the membership and organic movement would likely support a DOA which encompasses each element, with a focus on ECOSYSTEM (or a DOA that expresses each element in “ecological” terms).

Key components within each element are identified in the above tables and could be used as a guide of which terms to use in the final definition.