

Report on the Definition of Organic Agriculture Feedback on First Draft

Responsible: Louise Lutikholt, Strategic Relations Manager

Prepared by: Rachel Horwat, OGS and Strategic Relations Intern

Background:

The 2005 General Assembly adopted the motion that 'IFOAM shall succinctly define 'organic agriculture' based on the Principles of Organic Agriculture'. The World Board agreed that the Definition of Organic Agriculture (DOA) should adhere to the following criteria:

- Short / concise
- Positive as opposed to normative
- Positive as opposed to negative (what Organic Agriculture is NOT or does NOT use)
- Covers the full diversity of Organic Agriculture in the world
- No specific reference to certification (in line with position on full diversity of organic agriculture)
- Based on the Principles of Organic Agriculture

A Task Force on the DOA began formulating a first draft based on a report that summarized and analyzed existing and submitted definitions

(http://www.ifoam.org/organic_facts/doa/pdf/Definition_of_Organic_Agriculture_Report.pdf)

In addition to the mandate set by the World Board, the Task Force decided the definition should:

- Be functional, without being legalistic
- Be elegant, without being poetic
- Refer to organic's farming roots

The result was the following definition:

“Organic Agriculture: farm production systems that sustain the health of soils, plants, animals, and people; rely on ecological systems to conserve resources and maintain natural balance; build fair relationships that account for social and environmental costs; and care for the long-term productivity of the living landscape.”

A call was then made to IFOAM's internal bodies to comment on the first draft. This report summarizes the feedback that was received on the first draft DOA.

Feedback

Feedback was received from the following IFOAM internal bodies:

- Board
- Development Committee
- Standards Committee
- Program Strategy Committee
- IFOAM EU Group
- IFOAM Head Office Staff
- Organic Retailers Association

Although the general public and IFOAM members will be invited to comment on the second draft definition, 2 submissions were received from the general public and three from the following members:

- Institute for Social, Economic and Ecological Sustainability (ISEES)
- Nature & Progrès
- Organic Marketing & Export Network

All of the original submissions are included in Annex 1.

Method

All comments were categorized according to the following topics:

- General Comments and Guidance
- Purpose
- Scope
- Length
- Terms
- Sentence Structure
- Principles of Organic Agriculture
- “Farm Production Systems”
- Forbidden Inputs
- Suggestions for New Definitions

Within each category, similar comments were clumped under appropriate sub-heading statements that best summarized the comments (e.g. “*Forbidden inputs should be mentioned*”). Beside each statement is the number of times the comment was made. The categorization system served to provide an overall summary and impression of the feedback. In some cases, categorizing may have compromised the true meaning of the comment. It will thus be useful to consult the original submissions provided in Annex One.

Summary of Feedback

General Comments

Because general comments varied quite significantly, they are not summarized here. Please see General Comments and Guidance sections in Annex One of original submissions.

Purpose

(2) *The purpose of the definition is unclear.*

Scope

(3) *The definition is too broad.*

Length

(1) *The definition is too long.*

(2) *The definition is too short.*

Terms

There are unclear terms. The following terms are unclear:

- (10) build fair relationships that account for social and environmental costs
- (8) living landscape
- (2) account for
- (2) rely on ecological systems to conserve resources
- (1) long-term
- (1) natural balance
- (1) care for the long-term productivity
- (1) sustain
- (1) health
- (1) fair
- (1) farm production systems

Certain words should be replaced. “_____” should be replaced with “_____”.

- (3) “sustain” with “maintain and improve”
- (2) “farm” with “agriculture”
- (1) “sustain” with “promote”
- (1) “maintain” with “sustain”

- (1) “rely on” with “based on”
- (1) “systems” with “activity”
- (1) “living landscape” with “ecosystem”
- (1) “productivity of the living landscape” with “sustainability of the living landscape and human society”

New words should be added. The following words should be added “___”:

- (3) “improve” and sustain the health of soils...
- (3) “biodiversity”
- (2) people and their “livelihood”
- (2) “regenerate” and conserve resources
- (2) “standards”
- (2) “traditional scientific knowledge”
- (1) that account for “and reduce” social and environmental costs
- (1) care and “improve” the long-term productivity of the living landscape
- (1) “reactivate and/or” sustain the health of soils...
- (1) “movement”
- (1) “culture”
- (1) “alternative”
- (1) “food chain”
- (1) “promotes rural development”
- (1) “animal welfare”
- (1) “water”
- (1) “local resources”
- (1) “ecological”
- (1) “economic sustainability”

Sentence Structure

- (3) *Dislike the use of the colon (:)*
- (2) *Dislike the use of the semi-colon (;).*
- (1) *Use of sentences is limiting.*

Principles of Organic Agriculture

(4) The Principles of Organic Agriculture are not well reflected.

(1) The definition does not need to reflect the principles.

Use of the Term “Farm Production System”

(12) The term “Farm Production System” is too narrow.

Forbidden Inputs

(8) Forbidden inputs should be mentioned.

(1) It is good that forbidden inputs were not mentioned.

Suggestions for New Definition

Three new definitions were submitted. Please see Annex One for the Suggestions for New Definitions.

Annex 1 - The Submissions

The following comments were submitted:

Executive Board

Taken from: Executive Board Minutes, 10th-13th September 2006, Rodale Institute, USA

General Comments and Guidance

EB preferred to give general guidance at this point of time. The EB understood the definition to bridge between the old principles & the standards and the new principles. Why does IFOAM and the sector need it? A sharp definition is needed not only because the GA approved the respective motion, but for the daily work of all involved in organic, to present a positive message about organic to people who asked what organic is all about. Defining Organic or Organic Agriculture? It should be intended to define everything related to the concept of organic, also beyond the farm level. Organic is more than organic agriculture. The foundation of organic is of course agriculture and everything else grows from there. The principles of OA are also not targeting agriculture only, they target systems.

As opposed to the longer text in the principles it is intended to make the definition very short. This is a valuable intent. However, since the definition should indeed be very short, are guidance notes foreseen? The EB considered it to be appropriate that a short definition comes along with an explanation what is meant. Otherwise it could be taken up like a vague environmental statement of big companies. The way like it is presented right now is too vague, too nice, too positive.

Principles of Organic Agriculture

The Principles of Organic Agriculture are not well reflected.

What is missing in the draft definition is the dynamic to move towards the implementation of the principles.

Forbidden Inputs

Forbidden Inputs should be mentioned.

Is it feasible to define OA only in positive terms? Or would it be appropriate to also use terms excluding negative items? How to define chemicals in case those should be excluded? Terms used should be as clear as possible, e.g. synthetic pesticides - artificial fertilizers. Negative language is often more simple, easy to get across.

Development Committee

General Comments and Guidance

- Is a difficult task
- Criticizing is easier than to formulate.
- In IBS there were Principal Aims that were useful. Easy to use to explain to others what OA is about.
- It is not unique.
- It should be more practical, real.
- Organics is trying to imitate nature.

Purpose

The purpose of the definition is unclear.

- Definition should be worded in an active way. What is it doing? What is its purpose, why do you do this OA? Purpose is not clear. We are not doing it for the fun of looking after the environment.
- What is the definition for, who would use it, when how? Definition for OA cropping and livestock and ... that is easier to tell / explain, we could have a general one.

Scope

The definition is too broad.

Many conventional systems would fall under it. It is not specific enough. Important to do tests, take a number of real farm examples and measure against the definition. Green food people OR pollution free OR Eurep Gap fits under it too. Now it is too weak. In what way is OA distinguished from other agricultural systems?

Length

Too Long

- It is not short and concise.

The definition is too short.

- Could be longer, do not have to be limited to 4 lines.

Terms

There are unclear terms.

- Some terms may not be understandable to everyone, like 'farm production systems'

- How do you take into consideration social and environmental costs? Do they have to be taken in to be mentioned at all?
- ‘Relationships’ between what parties?
- ‘fair relationships’ that takes consideration of all involved stakeholders or parties
- ‘natural’ is backward, all human activities do change the system. Why maintain natural balance, for what, for whom?
- ‘landscape’ is difficult to translate in Chinese
- Landscape is not productive
- What is a ‘living landscape’?
- ‘Care for long term productivity’ is not clear, as a lot of people think they care
- ‘Account for’ is difficult wording
- ‘accounting for’ is not clear

Certain words should be replaced.

- ‘productivity’ should be replaced by ‘sustainability of the living landscape and human society’
- change ‘sustain’ into ‘promote’
- ‘Rely’ is difficult word, better use ‘based on’

New words should be added.

- Add ‘Livelihood systems’
- Not just conserving, it is also about regenerating, which is now excluded.
- Also regenerating and improving resources.

Sentence Structure

Use of sentences is limiting

Why should it be a sentence, it limits. You can use bullet points. Putting it in a sentence makes it difficult.

Principles of Organic Agriculture

The Principles of Organic Agriculture are not well reflected.

No flow, combines bits and pieces of the POA.

The Definition does not need to reflect the Principles of Organic Agriculture.

Does it really need to directly relate to POA? It makes it look like a belabored one that is why the flow is not good.

“Farm Production Systems”

The terms “Farm Production Systems” is too narrow

-‘farm’ is problematic, is it referring to tillage. Should be more general, ‘agricultural production system’. ‘Farm’ as such is limiting.

Forbidden Inputs

Forbidden Inputs should be mentioned

We cannot escape saying what we are NOT doing. ‘rather than’ might be a form to use.

Standards Committee

“Farm Production Systems”

“Farm Production Systems” is too narrow

-The definition should not address only “farm” production systems, it should cover production, processing and the things that are concerned with organic agriculture too.

-It is not only “farm production systems”

Program Strategy Committee

General Comments and Guidance

Over all the PSC responded positively to the draft although thought it was considered a little dry - not very poetic compared to the principles.

Do the principles need a preamble to contextualize this definition? e.g. to explain that it refers to primary production systems and not a description of organic products?

What the PSC liked about the draft - Focused on production of OA and referenced to Principles of OA

Length

The definition is too short

Is it necessary to restrict to one sentence?

Sentence Structure

Dislike the use of the colon

-Suggestion to link Organic agriculture to the rest of the text. Organic agriculture is...

“Farm Production Systems”

- OA is wider than agriculture so should the definition also include reference to wild harvesting and/or aquaculture?

IFOAM EU Group

General Comments and Guidance

- I agree with the draft
- too wishy washy

Scope

The definition is too broad.

-the text is nice, but is not specific for OA

Forbidden Inputs

Forbidden inputs should be mentioned

- it should include negative wording, so saying what OA is not
- it should point to the fact that OA has different priorities / non-negotiables than conventional

IFOAM Head Office Staff

General Comments and Guidance

- There is a common definition of the term “agriculture”, we should follow that framework.
- I think this is a description of ecological system
- Looks like the choice was to go for the “ideal” rather than the “practical” approach
- Sounds very academic
- Sounds easily quantifiable for human use. What about intrinsic value?
- Overall it is what I had in mind. I support the draft

Scope

Too Broad

-For me, as not so much familiar with rules etc. of OA, it doesn't give a good understanding or satisfying explanation. It seems too general.

Terms

There are unclear terms

-A lot of terms are used that might need a definition themselves e.g. Sustain, health, fair, social cost

“rely on ecological systems” - exclusively rely?

-What is long-term? 10 years? 5 years? 100years?

-What does social costs means?

-Social Costs- what is meant by this?

-The sentence - “builds fair relationships that account for social and environmental costs” is not clear

-“builds fair relationships” is not so easy to understand. e.g does this include relationships between animals and people?

-Unclear on “build fair relationships” that account for “social and environmental costs

-“that account for social and environmental costs” is unclear- what about returns? There are other social aspects.

-The way it is worded “rely on ecological systems to conserve resources” it implies that it is the role of the ecological system to conserve resources. It is possible to read it this way, as if conservation and maintenance is the job of the ecological systems

-What is living landscape?

-Living landscape is not clear to me, maybe it is an English problem

-What is living landscape? I do not understand the opposite- dead landscape

-Living landscapes- don't introduce new terms that must be defined written in the definition.

-Living landscape - organic involves more than just the landscape

-Living landscape does not seem like a statement related to the principle of care. To me, the landscape suggests a visual and aesthetic pattern and design, and does not include people and animals e.g. landscape architect

Certain words should be replaced.

-Replace “system” with “activity”

-“Farm” should be replaced with “agriculture”

-“Farm” should be “agriculture”

-Replace “living landscape” with “ecosystems”

-Replace “maintain” natural balance with “sustain”

- Replace “maintain” with “sustain” and “improve”
- Replace “sustain” with “improve”

New words should be added.

- biodiversity, specific and precise standards, ecological, economic sustainability, traditional scientific knowledge
- What about the utilization of ingenious methods/scientific methods that contribute to organic-agriculture’s further development?
- Add livelihoods - sustain the health of ...“people and livelihoods”
- Add improve - “care and improve for the long-term productivity of the living landscape”
- Add improve - “sustain and improve the health of soils”
- Add improve - “sustain and improve the health of soils”
- Add “in accordance with specific standards” (not saying certified but giving reference to them)
- Add and “promotes rural development”
- Biodiversity
- Biodiversity
- Animal welfare
- Food chain
- Culture
- Movement
- Alternative
- Local resources

Sentence Structure

Dislike the use of the semi-colon.

- I do not like the semi colons in the definition. Full sentences!

Disklike use of the colon.

- Don’t like the colon punctuation. Should be organic agriculture is...
- Should not use colon. Sentence should be “OA is a farm production system” But, without the colon, the sentence is incorrect. In order to keep the integrity of the phrases, the break needs to be made either after “systems” or “that”. If left as is, it reads “OA rely on ecological systems...” (which is an incorrect phrase).

Principles of Organic Agriculture

Principles of Organic Agriculture are not well reflected in the definition.

-It seems that “sustain the health of soils”, “build fair relationships” and “care for the long-term productivity” are goals of OA, and “rely on ecological systems” is how OA achieves the goal- but its not so clear

“Farm Production Systems”

“Farm Production Systems is too narrow

- Why restricted to farm? What about processing?
- Where does urban agriculture fit in?
- Should add “processing of agricultural products”
- Should include cattle, wild collection, processing
- “Farm” does not include wild collection, aquaculture, and related activities
- “Farm”? What about wildcrafting?
- Not only about “farm production systems”- what about processing, trade, nutrition, culture. Organic agriculture is a holistic lifestyle!
- “Farm production system” is a very limiting representation of OA- what about wild production, processing, urban agriculture, etc. What exactly does the movement encompass?

Forbidden Inputs

Forbidden inputs should be mentioned

- I think it should mention somehow that artificial substances are not part of keeping the 4 elements healthy
- Exclusion of chemical, synthetic products? Not self-evident

It is good that forbidden inputs were not mentioned

- It's not easy to avoid negative expressions of not using fertilizer and chemicals, so I like the positive expression about conserving resources and maintaining natural balance.

Suggestions for New Definitions

“Organic agriculture is a holistic production management system that promotes and enhances agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biologic activity. Organic production systems are based upon specific and precise standards of production which aim at achieving optimal agro-ecosystems that are socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable.”

Institute for Social, Economic and Ecological Sustainability (ISEES)

Terms

New words should be added.

-A missing element in the first draft is water. Water is necessary for organic agriculture and for life in general. We must sustain the health/quality/conservation of water--something that organic agriculture practitioners must consider as one of the highest priorities. I recommend including water in the first sentence:
Organic Agriculture: farm production systems that sustain the health of soils, WATER, plants, animals, and people...

Nature & Progrès

Terms

New words should be added

-Add "improve" - sustain (and improve) the health of soils...
-add "reduce"- "build fair relationships that account for (and reduce) social and environmental costs

Forbidden Inputs

Forbidden Inputs should be mentioned

We are all in favor of the definition of Organic Agriculture not being strictly negative. Although a strictly positive definition clearly reflects the objectives that organic agriculture follows, the construction of this ideal eludes the ability to identify what practices our movement is fundamentally opposed to. It is for this reason that European legislation has kept, until today, a simple definition which is "agriculture that does not use chemical synthetic products or Genetically Modified Organisms." It seems dangerous to have a strictly positive definition that could preclude the acceptance of the use of, or residues of "reasonable" amounts of chemical and synthetic products and GMO's in organic agriculture. We therefore propose to add to the definition:
"Organic agriculture does not use chemical synthetic products or products derived from biotechnology (Genetically Modified Organisms, nanoparticulates,...)."

Organic Marketing & Export Network

General Comments and Guidance

-the definition is great! Congratulations.

Terms

New words should be added.

-Maybe one should put before the word “sustain” the expression “reactivate and/or” (“Organic Agriculture: farm production systems that reactivate and/or sustain the health of soils, plants, animals and people;...”), since Organic Agriculture is not only a system to maintain or sustain health, but also to bring health there, where it has been lost.

Organic Retailers Association

General Comments and Guidance

Organic Retailers Association agrees with the proposal and has no comments

Comments from the General Public (2 submissions)

1

The Principles of Organic Agriculture and Forbidden Inputs

The Principles of Organic Agriculture are not well reflected.

Forbidden Inputs should be mentioned.

This definition is dealing with three main aspects of organic agriculture:

- the production activity and its agronomical aims,
- the ecological but does not take in account the current way of thinking “the natural balance”,
- and the social organisation and economical values.

But, the fundamental basis and ethics of organic agriculture is missing. We find there a summary of the 4 principles adopted in general assembly in 2005. However in the definition of OA, why don't we precise the common basis of these principles?

What element can we find in this text which clearly expresses the specificity of organic agriculture compared to any sustainable agricultural systems?

From a scientific point of view, it is difficult to propose new concepts and to reject biotechnologies with such a definition. We have to clearly announce **the basic ethics of organic farming: the respect of the life and the natural laws**, as soon as the living beings, not only the ecological systems. Some scientists will be able to demonstrate the respect of the first draft definition using GMO.

Moreover, the social organisation and economical values is the consequence of human values. The “respect of life” is also the respect of the men, their history and their cultures. The social organisation and economical values are considered also in the light of this superior principle.

Concerning the ecological systems, the notion of natural balance is now discussed in a broader approach in relation to resilience of complex adaptive ecosystems (see Holling C.S. publications). Whatever we do, evolution is working. So, whatever the considered scale, organic agriculture will enhance the natural way of adaptation of the living beings and the ecosystems.

Suggestions for New Definitions

So, I should like to propose a more precise definition of OA:

"Organic Agriculture relies on the respect of the laws of the nature, the integrity of the living beings and the ecological systems evolution: consequently OA promotes farm production systems that sustain and enhance the health of soils, plants, animals, and people; build fair relationships that account for human values and cultures; and care for the long-term productivity of the living landscape."

2

Suggestions for New Definitions

“Farm + food production systems, under laws, with traceability certify by third party inspectors, which sustain the health of farmers, final consumers, soils, vegetable and animals”.