

Principles of Organic Agriculture

draft for consultation 0501

Preamble

We hold these Principles as the foundation of the organic movement. The Principles are the roots from which organic agriculture grows and develops. They express the potential contribution that organic agriculture can make to the world, and a vision to improve all agriculture in a global context. Their function is to guide the positions, programs and standards developed by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). They are formulated as normative, or ethical, principles in recognition that the future we desire is not always realised today.

Agriculture is one of humankind's most basic activities because we need to nourish ourselves daily. History, culture and community values are embedded in agriculture. The Principles concern agriculture in the broadest sense, including the way humans tend the soil and interact with the landscape, plants, and animals; what we eat and wear; how food and other vital goods are obtained, handled, prepared, and distributed; and the legacy we leave to future generations.

Four principles have been created to identify organic agriculture:

- The principle of health
- The ecological principle
- The principle of fairness
- The principle of care

Each principle is articulated in a statement with an explanation. The principles all belong together to be used interdependently in consideration with the other principles. Together, they have been composed to inspire action to make their vision a reality.

Principle of health

Organic Agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal and human as one and indivisible.

This principle is the foundation of organic agriculture. It states that the health of all living systems and organisms, from the smallest in the soil to human beings, are mutually dependent. Even though they are separate entities, they belong together and form larger entities. It builds on the shared origin of the words “whole” and “health” and stresses the integrity of living systems as a whole.

Health is the maintenance of physical, mental and social well-being and not simply the absence of disease or illness. It is a continual process that accumulates and distributes the materials and energy necessary for the function of all living organisms. Mutuality, resilience, self-regulation and regeneration are key characteristics of this process.

The role of organic agriculture whether in farming, processing, distribution or consumption is to sustain and enhance the process of health at all stages and levels.

Ecological principle

Organic Agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.

This principle roots organic agriculture within living ecological systems. It stresses that production is to be based on ecological processes instead of external inputs. Nourishment and well-being is achieved through the ecology of the specific production environment. For example, in the case of crops this is the living soil; for animals it is the farm ecosystem; for fish and marine organisms, the aquatic environment.

Production, through farming or wild harvesting, should not be exploitative. It should be managed in accordance with the cycles that are observed in nature and all living systems. It should seek to enhance the properties of resilience, self-regulation and regeneration inherent in them. These cycles are universal but their operation is site specific. Therefore organic management must be adaptive and appropriate to local conditions, ecology, culture and scale.

This principle also applies beyond the farm to the processing, manufacturing, distribution and retailing of the products of organic agriculture. The concept of cycles should be applied to minimize resource inputs by enhancing reuse and recycling of materials and energy. Organic agriculture should also ensure that it does not adversely affect living systems, such as landscape, habitat, biodiversity, water or the general environment, which exist outside of its production areas.

Principle of fairness

Organic Agriculture should be built upon relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.

This principle deals with human relations and relations between humans and other living beings. It stresses that organic agriculture should maintain and conduct these relationships in a manner that ensures fairness: a concept that includes the characteristics of equity, respect, justice and stewardship.

Its use and management of natural and environmental resources should not perpetuate social and

ecological injustice. Instead, it should demonstrate how production and consumption can be socially and ecologically equitable and just by developing relationships built on fairness. Human relationships whether within or touched by organic agriculture should ensure fairness at all levels and to all parties – producers, farm workers, processors, distributors, traders or consumers – and should be seen to do so.

With regard to specific ecosystems and environmental resources, organic agriculture and all parties to it should acknowledge that rights and ownership are temporary and are ultimately held in trust for all living organisms and future generations. It's real environmental costs should be accounted for and should be transparent.

This principle insists that animals are provided with the conditions and opportunities of life that accord with their physiology, innate behavioral characteristics and well-being. Organic production systems should be constrained by the animal's needs - and not the other way around.

Principle of care

Organic Agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.

This principle primarily stresses the approach of organic agriculture to strategic and day-to-day management. Precaution and responsibility is called for, not risk assessment which is a narrow notion based on a narrow scientific or economic appraisal. By contrast care: precaution and responsibility encompass evidence and perspectives that can be scientific but can also be outside of the realm of science, have a moral content and a relevance to non-experts. This principle should govern management, development and technology choices in organic agriculture. Such a precautionary approach to decision-making will recognize that, even when the best scientific knowledge is used, there is often a lack of knowledge with regard to future consequences and to the plurality of values and preferences of those who might be affected.

Organic agriculture is a living and dynamic system. It cannot be static and survive; it has to evolve in the face of both internal and external demands and conditions. Consequently, existing practices and technologies need to be reviewed and if necessary changed, new ones assessed and introduced. Efficiencies can be found and improvements made but this should not be at the risk of jeopardizing the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment. This principle therefore, like the principle of fairness, depends on the involvement or representation of all stakeholders and it needs institutions of openness, transparency and participation.