

# Why have basic principles for organic agriculture?

... and what kind of principles should they be?

*Hugo Fjelsted Alrøe and Erik Steen Kristensen discuss the need for basic 'organic' principles within the worldwide organic movement. Such principles, it is envisioned, would act as a guiding influence on all future developments.*

**T**he demand for organic products has grown, and in recent years organic farming has gone through a quite dramatic growth and development in many high-income countries. This development has, in many ways, been similar to the development of conventional agriculture. Some characteristic features of modern organic agriculture are:

- Large-scale production – in many countries, organic farms are on average as big or bigger than conventional farms.
- Processing and marketing through large conventional food companies.
- Sale through supermarkets, sometimes using supermarket brands.
- Trade of feed, seed and other inputs through conventional companies.
- Global trade of organic feed and food products.

This development of modern organic agriculture has led to concern that organic practice is deviating from the original organic values and principles. There is, therefore, a new and renewed interest in the values and principles of organic farming that can guide its future development.

## Why are basic principles needed?

The main purpose of identifying and communicating the basic principles of organic agriculture is to determine what organic agriculture is and thereby guide its development. Today, organic agriculture is mostly characterised by its rules, and this is not good enough. Organic agriculture is a living system in a living and still more globalised world.

Basic principles are, first of all, needed to counter ongoing structural and technological developments that are themselves

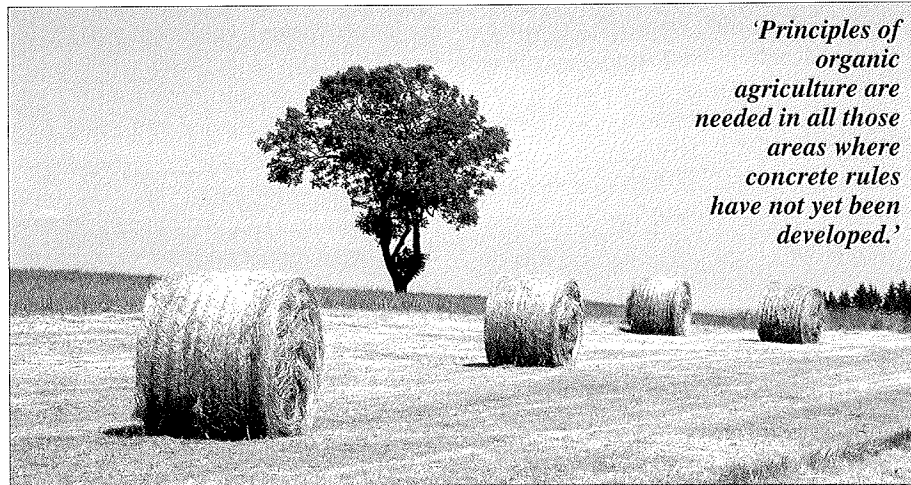
propelled by other values and general social mechanisms.

The need for principles is especially evident with respect to the multitude of new options and technologies that organic agriculture is faced with due to technological development and increasing globalisation. The surrounding world grows and changes, and organic agriculture changes with it, unless something tells it not to. Here the principles can be a guide as to where the ongoing development is to be controlled or stopped. Some of the new technologies and developments are acceptable and useful to organic agriculture, while others go against the basic values and principles. The existing regulations, standards and principal aims of organic farming are not always, in themselves, adequate as a guide for development in this rapidly changing world. Basic principles can be a tool to evaluate the development, correct the course, and avoid unwanted consequences by way of timely care.

In a more constructive spirit, principles of organic agriculture are needed in

all those areas where concrete rules have not yet been developed, where rules are hard to make, or where rules as such will tend to work against the organic spirit. Basic principles are needed to guide the development of 'organics' in new production areas such as fishery, forestry, industry, etc., where new practices, standards and aims have to be developed on the basis of the organic ideas and values. Likewise, basic principles are needed to guide the development of organic agriculture in new geographical areas where the practices, standards and aims will be somewhat different due to differences in the cultural and natural conditions. Basic principles have also been advocated as a necessary tool for researchers to initiate far-reaching, proactive research that can assist the development of organic agriculture, and the sustainable development of agriculture in general, in line with the characteristic ideas and values of organic farming.

In general, basic principles are essential as a guiding tool for the discussion and development of standards. Organic



*'Principles of organic agriculture are needed in all those areas where concrete rules have not yet been developed.'*

PHOTO: Kai KHELZER/KARIN HEINZE

farming has developed from a mainly value-based practice, guarded by personal contact, to a mainly rule-based practice that is guarded by certification and control bodies. A situation has now developed in which standards are continually being made more complicated and sometimes are even developed without any firm connection to the values of the organic movement. Basic principles could be used to stop or even reverse this trend. If they were allowed to serve directly as guidelines for organic practice, standards would be relieved of some of their duties and the tendency towards greater complexity may be counteracted.

In connection with the trend towards increased complexity, there is even concern whether a more focused formulation of the organic values is needed to sustain the organic movement itself. There is a considerable amount of work being carried out today on organic marketing concepts by large, not-exclusively-organic companies. In addition, individual states and supranational bodies are continuously

developing – in increasing detail – their organic rules. Neither of these activities can maintain and reproduce the organic movement as a distinct form of agricultural development. If a social movement is to continue to exist as a coherent, self-organising system, the core ideas, values,

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and visions need to be reproduced by the system itself in order to create and uphold the identity of the movement. The principles may be the pivot that organic agriculture can organise itself around, by way of expressing the key goals and values, the essential meaning, of organic agriculture.

### What kind of principles are needed?

In order for the principles to function as guidelines and organising principles, they need to be normative – that is, some kind of moral or ethical principles. Goals are not sufficient, because goals can be reached, but not used for setting new goals. Standards and regulations are not sufficient because concrete rules are to be developed in accordance with deeper goals or principles. Law-like or nature-given principles, like the principles of physics, are certainly insufficient, because they merely state how the world is and not how it should be. Values as such, or value-laden differences as commonly used in marketing concepts, are not sufficient, because they only refer to individual preferences and have no guiding force. It is our contention that organic movements are concerned with more than preferences; they are concerned with the proper way to do agriculture and produce food – how it ought to be done. Therefore, the kind of principles that are required, are normative or ethical principles for how to act in an

## Examples of normative principles of organic agriculture

In this article it is tacitly assumed that it is possible to formulate a small set of normative principles for organic agriculture that work at a deeper level than IFOAM's principal aims. This assumption is substantiated by the fact that such principles have actually been formulated in recent years.

There are two independently formulated sets of normative principles for organic agriculture; one motivated by new organic rules<sup>1</sup> and one motivated by research needs<sup>2</sup>. There are also some recent closely related approaches that seek to characterise the values of organic agriculture without specifically formulating a full set of normative principles. For instance in 2001 one attempt<sup>3</sup> identified three 'core values' of organic agriculture: 1) aim for holistic view, 2) aim for sustainability and 3) respect for nature, which was employed in an outline of a conception of animal welfare for organic farming systems. In 2003 another attempt<sup>4</sup> analysed the concept of the natural or naturalness in organic

farming. It identified three main approaches in organic agriculture related to naturalness: 1) the no-chemicals approach, 2) the ecological approach and 3) the integrity approach, and concluded that, if it refers to all these three approaches, the principle of naturalness can serve as a guide to future developments in the field of organic agriculture.

The first full set of principles arose in the process of formulating a new organic 'rule' in the USA. The rule suggested by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was met with serious criticism from the organic movement<sup>5,6</sup>. As an element in the discussion of the rule, a set of organic principles for evaluating the organic 'rule' were proposed<sup>1</sup>. The three principles are: 1) the ecological principle, 2) the precautionary principle, and 3) the systems principle.

The second full set of principles arose in the process of planning a new Danish research effort in organic farming. In this planning process the principles of organic farming and their role in the future devel-

opment came up for discussion. The new research should be proactive and forward-looking, have a long-term perspective, and help to promote organic principles. These objectives could only be fully satisfied, however, if a degree of consensus was reached on the principles of organic farming. In order to support this discussion, the Danish Research Centre for Organic Farming prepared a discussion document<sup>2</sup> on the 'Principles of Organic Farming'. The document sets out three general principles for how to develop organic farming based on an understanding of sustainability as functional integrity in line with organic views of human and nature.

The three principles are<sup>7</sup>:

*The cyclical principle* is a principle for how to interact with nature. It says that organic food systems should emulate and benefit from nature's systems and cycles, fit into them, and help sustain them. This is the oldest and most established organic principle. Kindred concepts are the ecological principle and the idea of naturalness.

*The precautionary principle* is a principle for how to make decisions on changes in technology and practice. It says that action should be taken to pre-

organic way'. By being ethical (ethical principles, ethical values) they claim to hold for others as well as for oneself. They state how responsible beings ought to behave, as opposed to simple values, aims, preferences, *etc.*, that bear no such claim in themselves.

The principles also have to be fairly simple and consistent. Until now, the development of organic farming has been guided by explicitly formulated rules together with more general principles and aims. Even the more general principles and aims, such as the 15 Principal Aims and the many General Principles in IFOAM's Basic Standards 2002 are, however, quite complex. The coherence and consistency between the different aims and principles are not explicitly discussed, and there is no reference to underlying values and principles that may establish the coherence and consistency. The aims and principles are also, themselves, being developed in connection with the changes and additions to the organic standards. It is therefore difficult to use

vent harm, even if there is no conclusive scientific evidence that this harm will occur. The principle also calls for the active promotion of cleaner, safer technologies and comprehensive research to detect and reduce risks.

*The nearness principle* is a principle for how to learn and communicate in food systems. It says that possibilities for personal experience and close contact between consumers, producers, researchers and other people involved in the organic systems should be created and maintained. All relevant people should be encouraged to take part in the development of organic agriculture. This participation should be facilitated by promoting transparency and cooperation in the production and communication processes in the organic food systems.

1. Benbrook and Kirschenmann, 1997
2. DARCOF, 2000
3. Lund and Röcklinsberg, 2001
4. Verhoog *et al.*, 2003
5. Kirschenmann and Kirschenmann, 1998
6. Lutz, 2000
7. Alrøe *et al.* 2002

**Note:** All details about these references are given in the full article published on the IFOAM website (under 'positions')



PHOTO: Kai KREUZER/KARIN HEINZE

*Early organic farming arose from an intuitive understanding of the natural system. It is now controlled by explicit rules.*

the IFOAM Principal Aims and General Principles, in their present form, as overall guidelines and tools for development of organic agriculture.

If the principles are to function as guidelines and 'identity creators', they must be easy to communicate and support decision making. Therefore, they should be few in number, they must not contradict each other, and they should not have excessive overlaps. They should be sufficiently general and not directed at any specific area, yet concrete enough to serve as a guide for development.

#### How to identify the principles?

There are different means of identifying normative principles of organic agriculture. The first step is to become familiarised with the worldviews and values that characterise the organic movements by consulting the historical documents on organic farming. The documents, however, will not provide a finished set of normative principles for organic agriculture as the early organic movements did not formulate such a set of principles.

The values and goals of organic agriculture are expressed in the principal aims, general principles and standards that have been formulated by the organic movements, all of which contribute to the process of identifying the 'principles'. Normative principles cannot, however, be directly construed from the principal aims, and the demand for consistency must have priority over existing aims and principles. The values of organic farming are also expressed in its practical application, so one might consider deducing the principles from established practice. However, this approach presents a problem, because there is a concern that organic practice is actually deviating from the original val-

ues. Conversely, the principles might be used as a basis for an evaluation and critique of the use of new technology in organic farming.

One cannot expect to find organic principles among the mainstream normative principles of applied ethics, because organic farming is an alternative movement that represents a break with the mainstream. On the other hand, appropriate principles may be found in the other alternative movements that organic farming is related to, such as the various environmental movements. Organic farming arose mainly from practice and reflections on practice, and as yet has no separate 'normative theory of organic agriculture'. The environmental movements, conversely, have spurred separate theories of environmental ethics. However, these movements and theories do not necessarily share the view of nature found in the organic movement, and this is a decisive difference.

Therefore, it is important to first identify the characteristic 'organic views' of nature and humans, which can then be used as a necessary means to identifying the basic normative principles. Such views probably differ somewhat within the organic movements, and they may not be particular to them. Still, as a preliminary suggestion, the following characteristic views of the relation to nature, of scientific knowledge and of human experience and interaction are proposed:

- A) Humans are part of nature. Social systems can be distinguished from natural systems, but not separated from them.
- B) Scientific knowledge of complex systems will always be limited and contextual. Some technological consequences are unforeseeable.

C) Living and learning is both experiential (hands-on) and social (co-operative). Organic food systems are networks of actors.

However, even if these views are deeply influential in the organic movements, they can only suggest normative principles, they cannot *justify* them. The choice and formulation of the principles

is, in the end, something to be decided by the organic movements.

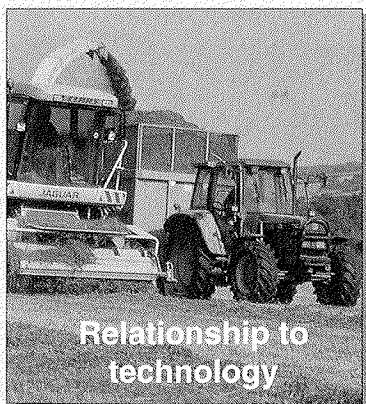
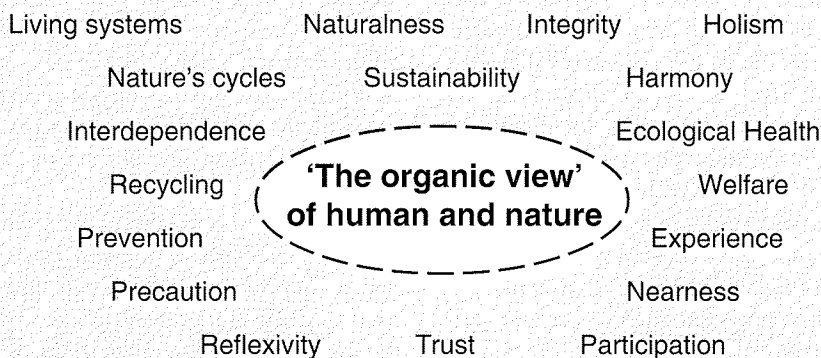
Given these means of identifying normative principles of organic farming, it seems that the formulation of such principles is best done on the basis of an intimate knowledge of the views, values and aims of the organic movement, connected to a knowledge of other normative principles and ethics in general. Within the

field of suitable normative principles there will presumably be quite a few possibilities to choose from, and some will have to be chosen that can cover the field (see box).

On this empirical and theoretical basis, a coherent and consistent set of normative principles for organic agriculture may be chosen and formulated. The suggested principles cannot, however, be fully justified on this basis. The decision that they are the proper normative principles of organic agriculture is, in the end, the responsibility of the organic movements. There is no shortcut justification of ethical principles.

**The relationship to nature, to technology, and to fellow participants in the organic food systems.**

A range of more or less value-laden concepts that may be developed into principles of organic agriculture. The concepts all relate to 'the organic view' of human and nature, and they are placed in relation to different aspects of 'acting in an organic way'.



**Conclusion and perspectives**

The principles of organic agriculture are concerned with how agriculture and food production ought to be conducted. Therefore, they have to be normative or ethical principles with sufficient generality and guiding force; but not comprehensive principles for a better world or general principles on how to behave in life. They will only concern certain aspects of our lives and actions, focusing on food, how it is produced, processed, traded and consumed in food networks, and on the relationship with nature's systems and cycles. It seems, however, that there is nothing to prevent these principles from being applied more generally on other human interactions with nature. The precautionary principle (see box left) was developed within such a broader environmentalist setting. And the nearness principle (see box overpage) is closely related to even broader democratic principles. As ethical principles they are of a general nature. This means that, from the perspective of organic agriculture, these principles ought to be followed outside the organic movements as well as inside them. But, of course, other groups or individuals may disagree with these normative principles.

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