

18<sup>th</sup> Organic World Congress

Written inputs from panelists  
of the Main Track Session

2A: [Organic visions and trends](#)

*Sustainability of Organic Agriculture: achievements and shortcomings (Fish bowl)*

Monday, 13 October 2014 (11:30-13:00)

18<sup>th</sup> Organic World Congress, October 13-15, 2014,  
Istanbul, Turkey

## **Organic Visions and Trends: Sustainability of Organic Agriculture: Achievements and shortcomings**

### **Background**

IFOAM and FiBL publish global statistics on the Organic World every year. The Organic Sector has grown to over US\$ 60 billion in turnover, 1.6 million farmers and 80 million ha of certified land. Non-certified Organic Agriculture is not even included. However, market shares are still low. The present main driver of development of Organic Agriculture is the demand from consumers ready to pay a premium.

After the Organic World Congress 2011, a number of leading organic stakeholders under the initiative of IFOAM built the Sustainable Organic Agriculture Action Network (SOAAN). In the meantime they have described a sustainability vision in a reference document for all who are working in the Organic World. IFOAM plans to bring this document to a membership vote in 2013.

The Organic World has achieved a lot but nonetheless fallen short of fulfilling many expectations. It has faced criticism worldwide, for example in studies and media reports.

### **Session Objectives**

This session will provide an overview of the most important achievements and present trends that are the engine of development of the Organic World, but also take inventory of the main shortcomings to be addressed in coming years.

### **Leading Questions**

- What does the Organic World today look like in a nutshell?
- How are we to understand sustainability? What is sustainable and regenerative agriculture?
- How do we compare to other sustainable agriculture initiatives?
- Which are our main achievements and our main impacts on the sustainability of the planet and the lives of its inhabitants?
- Which megatrends did we take advantage of well, and which ones passed us by?
- What are the shortcomings of Organic Agriculture, and how can we address them?

**Methodology:** Fish Bowl with 4 panelists and 2 open chairs.

**Moderator/Rapporteur:** Eva Torremocha/Konrad Hauptfleisch

### **Speakers**

- Nadia El-Hage Scialabba, FAO, Italy
- Elizabeth Henderson, Northeast Organic Farming Association, USA
- Beate Huber, FiBL, Germany
- Mathew John, IFOAM WB & Keystone Foundation, India
- Urs Niggli, FiBL, Switzerland
- Allan Savory, Savory Institute, Zimbabwe

**Allan Savory**

**What does the Organic World today look like in a nutshell?**

Growing on a sound foundation based on the biological sciences but still largely preaching to the choir when far more is needed if we are to seriously address global climate change and feeding billions more people.

**How are we to understand sustainability? What is sustainable and regenerative agriculture?**

Agriculture is not crop production alone. It is the production of food and fibre from the world's land and waters. There can be little or no hope of sustainability till agriculture is based on biological science and all food is clean, healthy and produced from regenerating soils and oceans. Currently agriculture is causing climate change as much as, or more than, fossil fuels. In the case of crop production only a small percentage is based on biological science, while over 90% is based on chemistry and smart marketing of advancing technology.

**How do we compare to other sustainable agriculture initiatives?**

I am not aware of any other than the efforts to restore the world's seasonal rainfall mainly grasslands, through holistic planned grazing, that constitute anywhere up to 90% to 95% of the land in many countries, particularly in the most problematic region across N Africa to China and India.

**Which are our main achievements and our main impacts on the sustainability of the planet and the lives of its inhabitants?**

Main achievement is keeping organic/sustainable agriculture alive and growing mainly in crop and small stock production, against government and international policies promoting unscientific agriculture based on marketing fossil fuels and technology for short-term gain. However admirable as is this effort it is simply not enough given the scale of the problem and time running out.

**Which megatrends did we take advantage of well, and which ones passed us by?**

I am not familiar with any megatrends you did take advantage of. I am aware of one you are passing by and that is the awakening awareness of the seriousness of global desertification and climate change.

**What are the shortcomings of Organic Agriculture, and how can we address them?**

I spoke about this in my first address to IFOAM twenty years ago in Christchurch,

N. Zealand. At that I began by asking the audience to define organic/sustainable agriculture which they did very well. I then asked if anyone could tell me how that differed from the agriculture that led to the ruin of many civilizations in all regions of the world. Agriculture was all organic and cattle were all grass fed for thousands of years and yet that led to so many civilizations failing. As I then pointed out IFOAM is going to have to dig much deeper if serious about sustaining civilization as we know it.

As Rebecca Costa wrote in her book "The Watchman's Rattle" those past people did not fail only due to their agriculture, but because their society's could not address the rising complexity of environmental deterioration and rising population. They turned increasingly to faith and sacrifices while shelving the problems for future generations. Somewhat as we are doing globally today. And today generally IFOAM is still not addressing that complexity – social/cultural/political, economic and environmental. So history repeats although now on a global scale.

IFOAM members are leading the way in advancing biological science-based agriculture but we can only seriously address both scale and timing by not only having people on the land practicing sound agriculture, but by having policies of governments and international agencies supporting such agriculture. In this way the full complexity can be addressed. Currently policies generally support unscientific agriculture based on smart marketing of technology (mostly oil-based) and chemistry and this is highly subsidized both in research and practice.

Currently IFOAM barely has a place at all at any policy table and thus unsound policies continue to expand everywhere. I believe IFOAM needs to seriously appraise its position and change strategy so that organic, sustainable, regenerative agriculture plays a major part in national and international policy development. Without this we are all re-arranging the deck chairs. I spoke about this at SI's recent London conference and did send a copy to Andre Leu.

**Nadia El-Hage Scialabba**

### **What does the Organic World today look like in a nutshell?**

The organic sector has steadily grown despite all odds, from the historical lack of public support, through agro-industrial pressure, to current economic crisis. Organic commodities have now entered large distribution and retail chains and the sector could be considered as “mainstreamed”. However, organic sales remain in the range of 2% of global market share, with small chances to occupy larger shares; purchases are limited to an informed elite and the proliferation of eco-labels, coupled with challenges posed by organic guarantee systems, hinders the development of organics markets.

### **How are we to understand sustainability? What is sustainable and regenerative agriculture?**

Sustainability is understood differently by people but is commonly accepted to include both environmental and social claims, and increasingly, corporate social responsibility. FAO has released in 2013 Guidelines for the Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture systems (SAFA), as an international reference for sustainable management, monitoring and reporting of food and agriculture enterprises. SAFA defines the constituent components of sustainable supply chains, including environmental integrity, economic resilience, social well-being and good governance.

### **How do we compare to other sustainable agriculture initiatives?**

Organic agriculture, especially when implemented with social justice requirements, or complemented with fair trade standards, is a “sustainability” leader, as it combines environmental, social and economic claims. Furthermore, organic guarantee systems, whether third party or participatory, ensure good governance. As challenges keep emerging, there is scope for the organic community to strengthen aspects such as: use of water, animal feed and materials; fair trading practices; and food system (re)design. Most importantly, better communication is needed on what lies behind the label.

### **Which are our main achievements and our main impacts on the sustainability of the planet and the lives of its inhabitants?**

The main achievement is the role model organics offer on the economic feasibility of a green economy. Its success is a driver of change, but also of competition, of environmentally-aware people. Organic agriculture has demonstrated that grassroots initiatives can be globalized, despite lack of adequate technologies and institutional marginalization. Global organic acreage is relatively small in order to produce tangible impact on the planet and its

inhabitants. However, the existence of pockets of healthy lands and people provides hope and encouragement for others to follow.

**Which megatrends did we take advantage of well, and which ones passed us by?**

It is sad to qualify pandemics as “megatrends” but recurrent failures in the conventional food sector have boosted organic agriculture. The “commoditization” of the organic sector has offered opportunities to enter mainstream markets but also has diluted the very principles of organic. Today, the rising power of corporate actors and global trade regimes are hindering the objective of establishing environmentally and socially-sound processes. Although short-supply chains and community initiatives are on the rise, organic values are often scarified for the sake of market-competitiveness.

**What are the shortcomings of Organic Agriculture, and how can we address them?**

The necessity to protect organic standards and not jeopardize input restrictions has isolated the organic sector. Also, the onerous and complex certification process discourages scrupulous producers and others. Considering the proliferation of sustainability initiatives, the limitations of organic certification systems, and the availability of IT tools, alternative systems must be explored to guarantee trustfulness of organic claims. Chiefly, the organic community needs to ally with other social and environmental movements in order to create a larger critical mass that can transform, rather than conform, the dominant agro-food regime.

## Mathew John

### Answers to Leading Questions

1. The Organic World in a nutshell: The organic world today, is still to me a very small world when I look at it from an Indian perspective. We say that we have nearly 600,000 farmers which is one of the largest no in any country but then our land under organic agriculture (3<sup>rd</sup> party certified) is just approx. 800,000 ha. This is much lower than China with 1.9 million ha. Even this is because of a large area of wild harvest (47 lakh ha). Actually, over the previous couple of years, the area under organic has dropped from close to 12,00,000 ha. Compare this to our country's statistics for agriculture – nearly 600 million farmer – that is about 1% and around 0.3 % of the total land devoted to agriculture. The potential is huge – maybe we are in our own cocoons... and need to take a hard look at the reality of the world outside.
2. How do we understand sustainability – what is sustainable & regenerative agriculture: sustainable as a word is used all the time and for me it involves not only the environment but people, their culture, cities, countries – how do they live and continue till tomorrow. About you and me. It has to be maintained and passed on to the future generation without making it a crisis or jeopardy for them. Agriculture is a part of this system. Sustainable agriculture has to respect land and its regenerative qualities – how much do we extract out of the land... can it go on producing enough for the succeeding generations. An e.g. of 'shifting agriculture' in many parts of the world.
3. Comparison of OA to other sustainable agriculture initiatives – I think many other initiatives have their own contexts and I don't want to get into a 'we are better than all the rest' debate. In different contexts many of them are relevant, especially local contexts. I am clearly not promoting chemical inputs but there are others who have parts of it which are very important – labour, environment... I think they need to be encouraged and how do OA initiatives partner with them to build broad platforms.
4. Main achievements & main impacts on the sustainability of the planet and its inhabitants: I think one of the main things that organic agriculture has shown that there is no one single method of agriculture. Primarily the main leg on which most of the push of industrial chemical agriculture is based on is to feed more and more people on this planet which OA has shown that, is not the answer. One of the crucial impacts that OA has that it deals in a proactive manner rather than a reactive manner. The environment is treated in a holistic manner – the soil, the water, the air – all these elements are given a chance to be healthy for future generations.

5. Megatrends that OA took advantage of and which passed us by: Health, regionality vs global, organic as an alternative lifestyle; organic has not become mainstream, have not been able to influence government policies, comfort at the cost of what?
6. Shortcomings: time & labour intensive

## **Elisabeth Henderson<sup>1</sup>**

I see this session as a continuation of the SOAAN gathering in Bonn to spread the excitement and passion of those discussions to the broader membership of the organic movement at the Organic World Congress in Turkey.

### **What does the Organic World today look like in a nutshell?**

In most European countries and in the US, organic agriculture is making headway towards becoming part of the mainstream of green business. In the global south, however, certified organic focuses on export, while local markets for organic products are not well developed. As pointed out in IAASTD, governments and research institutions have not directed adequate resources to improving peasant agriculture, the millions of small scale and subsistence farms that sustain large portions of the world's population. Even in the industrialized nations, family scale farmers struggle economically. Cheap food policies maintained by governments like that of the US keep prices for farm products below the true cost of reproduction of farms. Externalities - the cost of water for irrigation, pollution of soil air and water by agri-chemicals, health costs from diseases brought on by poor nutrition – are not included in the price of food.

### **How are we to understand sustainability? What is sustainable and regenerative agriculture?**

Learning from the Native Americans, sustainability means living on the earth so that our Mother will be healthy and productive for the next seven generations.

### **How do we compare to other sustainable agriculture initiatives?**

Fair Trade does more about fair pricing to farmers, but less about the ecology of farming, and not much for farm workers.

### **Which are our main achievements and our main impacts on the sustainability of the planet and the lives of its inhabitants?**

Organic has contributed to the understanding that we must focus on healthy soil and grow food using the natural resources around us without expensive imports, especially those that damage the health of the soil and disrupt the natural ecology.

### **Which megatrends did we take advantage of well, and which ones passed us by?**

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<sup>1</sup> Organic Farmer, Representative of the Northeast Organic Farming Association

Our 40 years of campaigning for a healthier diet from healthier soils has changed mainstream thinking. There is a new wave of younger (and older) people who want to return to the land. But we have not caught the winds of change in our sails - Arab Spring, Occupy, the popular movements for justice and equity in Europe, Via Campesina's call for food sovereignty

**What are the shortcomings of Organic Agriculture, and how can we address them?**

We must pay more attention to the social aspects of agriculture: we must shift from an agriculture that depends on the constant influx of desperate, low paid workers to a respected and well compensated, skilled, stable, domestic work force. We need to elevate farm work to the place of respect it deserves. That means pushing in every way we can imagine to remunerate farmworkers adequately, starting with the farmers themselves. Everyone working on our farms deserves living wages with decent benefits, health care, retirement, funds for professional development and the respect that is due to the people who work so hard to produce food that is both essential to survival and a sacred expression of our relations with the forces of nature.

Elizabeth Henderson farmed at Peacework Farm in Wayne County, New York, producing organically grown vegetables for the fresh market for over 30 years. She was a member of the Board of Directors of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY) until 2013, and represents NOFA on the Management Committee of the Agricultural Justice Project. In 2009 NOFA-NY honored her with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Her writings on organic agriculture appear in The Natural Farmer and other publications, and she is the lead author of Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture (Chelsea Green, 2007). She also wrote A Food Book for a Sustainable Harvest for the 300 members of Peacework Organic Community Supported Agriculture (aka GVOCSA) in its twenty fifth year in 2013.

## **Urs Niggli**

Organic farming has always played the role of an eye-opener and avant-garde movements for sustainability. As such, OF has remained a global niche although between 10 and 20 % land area have been converted in a few European cases. As a avant-garde movement, OF has not been able to become mainstreamed. Other sustainability movements like LEISA, Agro-ecology and Agroforestry will take over and upscale the most important ideas of organic farming. With globally 0.9 % of the agricultural land, OF has not contributed to the sustainability of the planet except as a proven concept in a tiny niche inspiring other movements to become mainstream. A new definition of OF under the premises of ecological, social, economic sustainability and good governance would lead to the same 'principles' as defined by IFOAM but to different, more open production standards.