Organic and Low Input Food Consumers Concerns and Perspectives for developing the Organic Market in the Future

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***Abstract* - This contribution deals with occasional consumers attitudes to organic/low input food in relation to quality and safety issues; and presents the preliminary results of studies conducted as part of the EU Framework 6 QLIF research project. The main result shows that a lack of knowledge among consumers about the production and processing techniques leaves room for a learning process on how to give pragmatic content to the demand from "caring people" and how to allow consumers to learn more about farming and processing.[1]**

Introduction

Numerous authors have studied consumers attitudes to and concerns about organic food, revealing various buying motives (health, tastiness, and environmental and ethical concerns), depending on the country (Zanoli, 2004).
Most recent European studies focus mainly on "regular"/"faithful"/"heavily" committed organic consumers. However the percentage of such consumers in the population remains low, and the growth rate is declining in some countries (Hamm et al., 2004). Therefore, it can be concluded that the future growth of the organic market must rely on reaching "light"/"new"/"occasional" consumers.

Reaching, informing and convincing these light consumers to become more loyal towards organic products is difficult because:

(i) The supply needs to be adapted to this occasional demand while the concerns of "core" consumers have to be kept in mind. If light and core organic consumers tends to have different concerns, there is a difficulty to address both at the same time.

(ii) Environmental and societal concern are growing in the world agri-food sector. The support that governments give to their agricultural systems must nowadays be legitimated, which provides new support for "Low Input" agri-food systems, techniques and certification (integrated agriculture, for example).

(iii) Other alternatives exist and may compete with Organic Food and Farming (Origin Labelled Products, farmhouse products, direct sales, etc.) . For "light" organic consumers, "organic" is not the only reference for quality products, and organic products have to be put in their competition area.

(iv) One of the pathways for the development of the organic market may involve the development of processed and pre-packaged products that may be demanded by occasional organic consumers but often rejected by regular consumers who may distrust and suspect the technologies involved.

In this framework, the QLIF project seeks to address key questions related to the quality and safety of both organic and low input foods in a broader perspective. The sub-project devoted to consumers' expectations addresses the following questions:
1. How do consumers define and construct meanings around the concepts of quality and safety as they relate to organic and low input foods?
2. How do such concepts and meanings vary for different model commodities?
3. What are the mechanics of consumer perception and behaviour for organic and Low Input foods? And what role do quality and safety characteristics play within this?
The research framework considers the gap between the quality of the product, as it is designed by the actors in the processing chain, and the quality as it is perceived by the consumer.

Methodology

On the basis of a comprehensive literature review and in accordance with the previous statements, the first step in the research involves four focus groups (FG) in five countries (France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and the United Kingdom), concentrating on four products (bread, yoghurt, tomatoes, and eggs; two for each FG).
We focus on occasional "uninvolved" consumers of organic products, which are compared with low input and conventional products, and we deal with quality and safety attributes and with production and processing techniques. This last choice is based upon the interest of today's consumers in production techniques for assessing quality and upon an evolution of

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organic standards at farming and processing levels, and is strongly concerned by a set of "critical technologies" (Schmid et al., 2004).
The following questions are handled in the FGs: buying criteria for food, possible disappointment with the purchased products, the influence of production and processing techniques on quality, and willingness to pay for the product.

Results and Brief Discussion

For fresh or lightly processed products, organic is seen as a guarantee of the naturalness and "pureness" of the food (without pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, etc.). Organic is associated with freshness and a minimal level of processing. Organic is thus linked to short distribution channels, on-farm production, and self-production. There might be a confusion in the consumer's mind, between "Organic" and any product purchased through short distribution channels. When there is a general distrust in the long production, processing and distribution food chain, "Knowing the producer" is an important factor in the trust building process for the consumer. In the same time, some consumers turn to self production or processing of food.
Furthermore, for some consumers, organic can also be considered to be an assurance of food safety for processed foods when farming or processing techniques are suspected. For example, high spatial concentration of hens in egg production can be associated with bad quality or even create disgust for industrial eggs.
In that case, "free range eggs" or "barn floor eggs" may be a cheaper alternative to organic for "light" organic consumers. For some consumers, the BSE crisis has lead to mistrust in the conventional beef commodity chain, but also in the whole industrial production – processing and distribution food chain. Consumers' knowledge of agriculture, food technology and processing seems weak, with differences between countries. Furthermore, the consumers do not associate immediately the crop production techniques and the product when it is processed: For example wheat and bread, milk and yoghurt. Some consumers are seeking for information, and some other consumers feel overwhelmed by the quantity of information they should gather to make their food choices.
Both attitudes can lead to reinforcement in the organic consumption. The latter wish to have a label "not to have to think when I buy my food" which provides insurance in food safety and quality, without personal investment.
The others learn about conventional and organic agriculture. Some conventional techniques are strongly rejected, like battery poultry production, use of antibiotics in animal feeding, etc. Therefore, reference to conventional industrial techniques might be a strong incentive to buy and eat organic food for some consumers.
Thus, the question raised here is how to take advantage of the consumers' "willingness to learn".

Conclusions

The main question raised by this approach is building consumers' trust in the product. Long commodity chains, industrial agriculture and processing, retailing through supermarkets can be linked, in some consumer's mind, to profit-seeking as a major goal of the organisation. Certainly, not all low-input foods have to be associated with "careless industrial methods"—hence, in this perspective, the consumers' high interest in the technical and economic conditions that prevail in supply chains (including the ability to "take care"), legitimates the attempt to address the "learning hypothesis" in our research agenda (Sylvander et al., 2004).

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