

## Common rules for 'out of home' catering

*Could common EU rules for organic catering be possible? Are they needed or even desired? There are several initiatives in Europe that work on the exchange of information between the different EU countries with regard to catering standards and certification, and these are setting the groundwork for a long-term harmonised regulation.*

There are many different types of business and public services that can be defined as being involved in mass catering. These include hotels, restaurants, coffee shops, canteens, take aways and catering and public procurement services in schools, day care centres, hospitals, work-place locations, etc, in subsidised or non-subsidised conditions. Until very recently organic mass catering operations in the EU have been unregulated. The first EU legislative reference to these types of operations was in the new EU organic legislation, Regulation EC 834/2007, which defined mass catering businesses as those with a 'food business at the point of sale or delivery to the final consumer'. The Regulation mentions mass catering to clearly exclude it and to allow Member States to choose their individual approach. Thus, the current situation remains that each Member State can apply their own national rules or private standards and on labelling and control of products originating from mass catering operations.

Throughout Europe governments, businesses and caterers are increasingly interested in the procurement of organic food, but face many challenges. To aid their efforts a project called 'innovative Public Organic Food Procurement for Youth' (iPOPY) was set up to 'suggest efficient

policies and instruments for increased consumption of organic products in public food serving outlets for youth' (see box). The project leader organisation is Bioforsk Organic Food and Farming in Norway.

Professor Dr Carola Strassner, from the University of Applied Sciences Münster, Germany, has spent many years studying mass catering – or 'Out Of Home', a term that she

prefers because it denotes the entire out-of-home market. Since 2007 Strassner, together with MSc student, Melanie Lukas, have participated in the iPOPY project, in direct collaboration with the project coordinator Anne-Kristin Løes from Bioforsk Organic Food and Farming.

The project comes to its end in June 2010 and already has produced its conclusions and recommendations. iPOPY focused on organic school meals and therefore, and in this context, the project has established three broad points:

*Certification:* Certification of organic school meals would contribute towards ensuring and controlling organic quality, and may make the use of organic products visible, if so desired. Common EU standards would be largely welcomed among stakeholders representing the certifi-

### *iPOPY and CORE Organic*

Funded by the CORE Organic I network, innovative Public Organic Food Procurement for Youth (iPOPY) is one of eight European pilot research projects funded by the CORE Organic I funding body network. The project is a co-operative initiative between institutes in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway, with the participation of two German researchers from the University of Münster. Its aim is to suggest efficient policies and instruments to increase consumption of organic products in public foodservices for youth and to study how the implementation of relevant strategies can contribute to this increase. The interdisciplinary research of iPOPY includes policy issues, supply chain organisation and the role of certification, users' perceptions and participation in the food system, and the health impacts of organic food implementation.

CORE Organic is a transnational partnership where resources within research in organic food and farming are joined. The project is initiated as a part of the European Commissions ERA-NET Scheme, which intends to step up cooperation between national research activities.

The first CORE Organic ERA-NET ended in 2007. Afterwards, the partners of CORE Organic expanded their network and developed a second ERA-NET, CORE Organic II, which will be a collaboration between 27 partners in 22 countries. The ERA-NET is expected to start in 2010.

[www.coreorganic.org](http://www.coreorganic.org)

cation sector.

*EU policy:*

- Due to broad variations of school meal systems across Europe and different approaches towards implementing organic produce, EU-wide regulations or directives on organic school food do not seem appropriate. However, information, advice, and guidelines provided through European networks, supporting exchanges, showing best practices and stimulating learning processes may give valuable orientation.
- EU regulations on public procurement should be relaxed in order to widen the room for manoeuvre with regard to quality requirements, such as those that may increase the use of local foods. This would allow greater flexibility towards sustainable and organic procurement. In addition, any guidelines should be tailored to each nation and its specific food cultures in order to stand the greatest chance of success.

In addition to the certification and policy aspects mentioned above, iPOPY also produced a number of useful recommendations for stakeholders related to all the different aspects of school food such as health, education, organisation of the service, etc. Some of these recommendations and findings are:

- *'Introducing or increasing organic food in school meals needs to go beyond the simple replacement of conventional food with the organic equivalent. Embedding organic food in public school meals should strive for a whole school approach comprising, for example, of the re-organisation of menu planning, linking food education with the curricula and the formulation of new food, health and nutrition policies for schools.'*

An interesting finding of the project is that schools serving organic food are more likely to have a dedicated food and nutrition policy.

- The process of introducing and maintaining an organic food service works better when it is participative: standards procedures and all aspects related to the organisation and outputs of the system should involve the most relevant user groups. A good example of this is in Italy where the 'Canteen Commissions' made up of caterers, parents, students and teachers, discuss and plan different aspects of the service, such as meal quality, menus, etc.

### **Mass catering, EU Regulation and opinions on certification**

A study on certification and standards undertaken by the researchers at Münster University was included in iPOPY Work Package 3. Among other tasks, the study reviewed and analysed procedures for certification of food serving outlets to propose certification procedures adapted to general European conditions. Though it did not focus on just school food services, the conclusions drawn from the study have been very useful for iPOPY aims, as Anne-Kristin Løes, iPOPY coordinator, explained to TOS: *'School meals are a very challenging arena to introduce organic food if the aim is "simply" to increase the public consumption of organic food in a certain area. However, such meals can be quite visible and you reach many people there, as compared to e.g. meals served in an institution. Hence, certification has a special relevance in the school setting.'*

A good starting point to conduct any research on the Out Of Home market is to realise that it is difficult to define and to quantify. However,

in general it includes any business or public service that provides food or full meals to the public. Thus, it includes the service industry (hotels, restaurants, etc.) and any work place or public service canteen.

The EU Organic Regulation EC 834/2007 allows Member States to choose their individual approach to how the Out of Home market is regulated. However, the Regulation also states that by 31 December 2011 at the latest, the Commission shall submit a report to the Council. The report will review the experience gained from the application of the Regulation, and with regard to its scope, in particular on organic food prepared by mass caterers.

Prior to the implementation of Regulation EC 834/2007 organic mass catering was unregulated. However, the EU Regulation reference has not resulted in caterers having to change their day to day practices compared with the situation before 2007. But at least, Dr Strassner concluded, by being mentioned *'the new EU regulation allows caterers to be treated differently to any of the groups identified so far, for example processors. This is a chance to take into account the special conditions found in parts of the foodservice sector and also an excellent opportunity for differentiation in statistical data, so that in future data on organic might be collected more easily.'*

Current developments in the Out Of Home market in Europe make it urgent that a solution for organic foodservice regulations is found. This includes developing a definition of the concept that is recognisable by consumers so that the integrity of organic production is preserved. With increasing levels of food processing, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between foodservice and

retail food purchase. The different situations where prepared food can be offered to consumers are so wide and the food cultures in different EU countries are so diverse, that it is difficult even to define when the Organic Regulation applies. It is even harder to set long-term harmonised endeavours.

Since every Member State can deal with mass catering as they like, it is possible that unchecked organic foodservice concepts will proliferate. However, one of the main precepts of Community rules is to provide a harmonised concept. Therefore, although it is a difficult field, the concept of harmonised mass catering regulations is worth working towards.

## Questionnaire

In the study conducted by Münster University, an online questionnaire containing 18 questions was sent to certification bodies. A second survey was then addressed to other professionals experienced in the organic Out Of Home field and familiar with the issue of its certification, such as public sector staff, researchers, developers and journalists. Though few in number, responses were received from countries throughout Europe.

Three of the more significant questions asked were:

- What is your opinion about the current (non-)regulation of mass catering in European countries?
- What is your opinion about the situation regarding the whole of Europe?
- What is the position of your organisation regarding a potential European harmonisation of certifying restaurants and catering?

Responses were very diverse, and there was little consensus about the current situation. However, the exception was in response to the question: What is your opinion on a possible

EU-wide harmonised organic certification scheme for restaurants and catering? The majority (80%) responded that they think it would be positive (see graph below).

## Main conclusions of the survey

The low return rate of the survey means that the replies only reflect a small set of opinions. However the replies provide valuable preliminary results for this field of research. In addition to the conclusion that the majority wish for an EU-wide harmonised regulation, other conclusions of the survey were:

- There is dissatisfaction, especially among the certification bodies, with the different regulation systems of organic certification of mass catering within Europe. In both groups there is no correlation between the satisfaction level of the participants and the type of regulation in their country.
- All important stakeholders and drivers – certification bodies, organic

associations, caterers and political authorities – should be involved in the process of harmonising standards for mass catering.

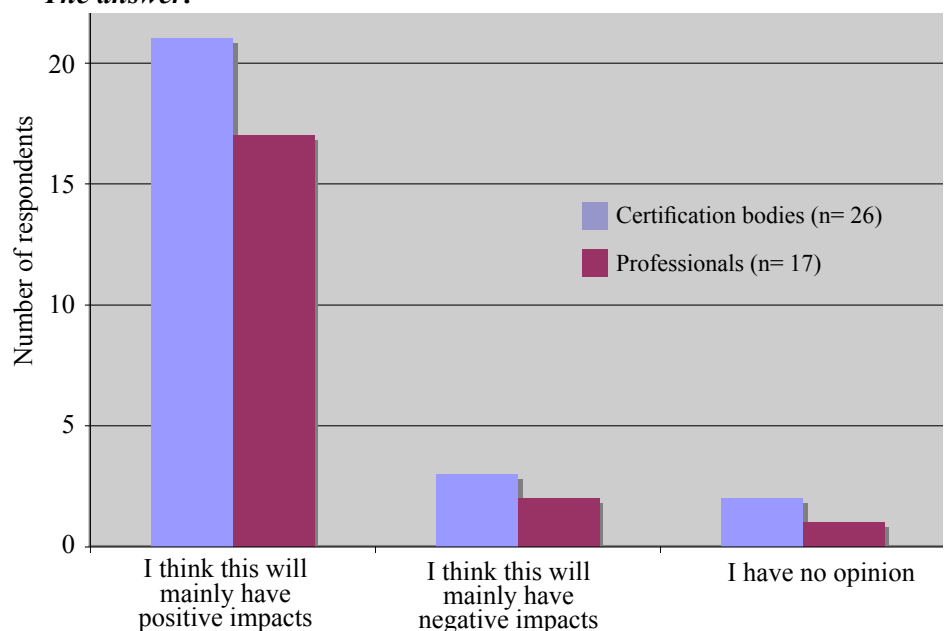
## Current certification solutions in different countries

Currently, all possible regulatory scenarios for organic Out Of Home systems can be found in Europe, including countries with no certification system. In the countries with a certification system, it is possible to find situations where:

- Rules are at the national level but control of catering operations is by private certification bodies, for example Germany, Austria and France.
- Catering certification is in the hands of public institutions, for example Denmark (Danish Food Authority) and Finland (Evira).
- Control of organic catering is only through private initiatives.
- Rules apply to a wide range of Out Of Home food services, such as restaurants, hospitals, catering,

**The question:** *What is your opinion on a possible EU-wide harmonised organic certification scheme for restaurants and catering?*

**The answer:**



schools, etc., for example Austria.

- Rules apply to private restaurants and the catering sector, but not to social catering, for example, France.

Examples of the situation in some specific countries are:

*Denmark:* Rules for large-scale kitchens that resemble the smiley system for hygienic standards (bronze, silver or gold medals) have recently been established.

*Finland:* Restaurants just inform the authorities on the use of organic ingredients certified according to the EU Regulation.

*Germany:* Has both rules at the national level and private initiatives. Due to Germany's federal structure, 16 supervisory authorities within the 'Länder' (federal states) are responsible for 23 approved inspection bodies currently operating in the market. Under certain conditions, menu items may be labelled with the German state Bio-Siegel logo. Different private rules and labels for foodservice also applied, as those from the associations Bioland, Biokreis and others.

*Italy:* The European leader in organic school meals, but there is little focus on the certification

of organic catering at the moment. The system is organised at the regional and municipal level, with the participation of all school stakeholders and without a sanction system that would correspond to a certification scheme. Italian regions have implemented ambitious laws and guidelines supporting the use of organic produce. Municipalities have designed sophisticated calls for tenders and supported the establishment of organic supply chains – often on a regional basis. On average, 40% (by weight) of the food products procured for school meals are organic, and in many cases the food service is financed, or partly financed, by the families of the children attending the schools.

*Norway:* The Food Safety Authority has delegated the certification of production, processing and distribution of organic food to the private organisation Debio. Thus, there is private control but it is undertaken by only one certification body.

*Sweden:* Has the oldest private standards for foodservices in Europe. These were developed by KRAV, which has certified restaurants in Sweden since 1996. Regarding public procurement, Sweden had

an official target to have 25% of all public catering (schools, hospitals, prisons, institutional canteens, etc.) serve organic food by year 2010.

The real situation in this the target year, is that around 10% served organic food.

*UK:* Control is with the private organisations. The Soil Association, which has developed standards and a certification system for foodservices, believes that restaurants and other caterers do not have to be certified in the same way as organic production and processing organisations. ■

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**Additional reading:**

Strassner, Carola 2009. *Food Service and catering in Europe and future perspectives for European regulation. The New EU Regulation for Organic Food and Farming. Background, Assessment, Interpretation. IFOAM EU Group, Brussels 2009.*  
[www.ipopy.coreportal.org](http://www.ipopy.coreportal.org) (visit Organic E-prints and search for 'iPOPY').

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