

1st Report of the Working Group on Standard Development

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Introduction

The initial meeting of the working group on standard development took place at the 1st SAFO-Workshop, September 2003, in Florence. In accordance with the main topic of the Workshop, the discussion was primarily focused on the relationship between socio-economic aspects of the standards and the issue of animal health and food safety in organic farming.

In order to compile information about the current situation in the different European countries and to get to know the main constraints in the transformation of the standards, a questionnaire survey will be carried out in the near future. The questionnaire will be developed before the 2nd SAFO Workshop in March 2004. The members of the Working Group are responsible for sending out the questionnaire to various representatives in the different countries, including stakeholder groups and specialists in organic livestock farming. Main emphasis will be put on the question of how far and in which way the current EU standards are expected to influence animal health and food safety in different regions and in different farming conditions. Opinions on which direction the regulations should be developed will also be sought. The results of the survey and the conclusions by the Working Group will be presented and discussed at the 2nd and 3rd SAFO Workshops.

The following report cover the additional issues discussed in the 1st Working Group meeting in Florence.

What is the outcome of “standards”?

Organic standards describe the minimum of what is expected in relation to the transformation of the code of practice and, therefore, define a production process and a minimum of 'process quality'. The level of standards is always a compromise between the interests of different groups of stakeholders and, as a consequence, a compromise between principles and reality. There is, or should be, a development within the standards to adapt the rules to changing conditions and expectations. On the other hand, there is a risk that an adaptation process may weaken the overall goals and principles.

Standards provide an opportunity to control and certify the transformation of the standards into practice. They do not guarantee a specific, intrinsic quality of organic livestock products. On the

other hand, consumers expect that organic products are of a higher product quality than conventional products, as a result of the production process. The confidence of the consumers in organic products and their willingness to pay premium prices will depend on the future developments, i.e. whether the gap between the expectations and the provided quality can be reduced.

Who are the stakeholders?

Farmers

In organic livestock farming, a lot of different stakeholder groups are involved. First of all, there are the farmers. Pioneering organic farmers tried to put the main principles of organic agriculture into practice and developed the organic concept in opposition to the mainstream agriculture.

Consumers, market place

As the production is driven by consumer demand and depends on the willingness of consumer to pay premium prices, consumers are important stakeholders, by and large, represented by the market for organic products. In addition, food wholesalers and retailers play an important role, as they are paying increasing attention to the presumed expectations and wishes of a broad segment of current and potential consumers of organic foods. Several studies and surveys show that there is a discrepancy between consumer expectations and the level of production quality that can be provided by standards. These findings imply a risk of confidence loss in organic produce among.

Society

A third group, with an interest in organic livestock production, is the society itself, by and large, represented by policy makers and governments. Their expectations are likely to be that the organic livestock farming provides better animal welfare and that agro-ecosystems are more sustainable than the conventional systems.

Animals, farms

Additionally, it has to be discussed whether farm animals themselves could be seen as a stakeholder group, accepting that livestock are sentinel beings. Also, an agro-ecosystem, like a farm, can be seen as a stakeholder, as each ecosystem requires specific resources (nutrients, labour, investment etc.) in order to function within a holistic approach as a sustainable 'farm organism'.

What are the resources?

Two of the stakeholder groups that deal directly with resources: farmers and the public (including policy makers, governments and the consumers). On the farmer side, the main resources are

labour (as a human resource), soil, climate, structure of landscape (and others as a natural resource), home-grown feedstuffs, production capacity of the animals, etc.. The public has to pay for the deliveries direct by way of surpluses on prices for organic livestock products, or indirect by subsidies. Here the resources are the willingness to pay premium prices and the economic capability to do so. It will be of high relevance for the future development of organic livestock farming whether the resources of the two groups can be brought into a balance.

To what degree do standards influence animal health and food safety?

The EEC Regulations on organic livestock production have, among others, the objective to provide good conditions for a high status in animal health and welfare by stipulating adequate space allowances in the indoor and outdoor areas and by providing litter in the lying area. On the other hand, feeding, as one of the most important factors of health, is not well-defined in the standards under species specific physiological aspects. Furthermore, the measures, which should be carried out in a case of disease, are not very specific or formulated in great detail. Therefore, it is justifiable to assume that the standards do not guarantee a high level of animal health and welfare. Currently, reliable data are missing to support or reject this hypothesis, as existing, published data offers evidence both in support and favour of it, being sometimes even contradictory.

In the standards preceding the current EEC Regulation on organic livestock production, direct controls of animal health were not part of the regulation. The question arises, whether the on-farm control of preventive measures or a direct measurement of animal health status on farms would be a suitable tool to improve the situation and would ensure a high animal health and welfare status in organic livestock farming.

How far do the standards have an influence on food safety?

In the current EEC Regulation, the requirements to use 100% organic feedstuffs (derogation until August 2005) and to implement a prolonged withdrawal period following the use of with chemically synthesised veterinary medicinal products are the most relevant regulations of the standards in relation to food safety. It is assumed that these requirements reduce chemical residues in organic livestock products. However, even the prolonged withdrawal period cannot guarantee absolute absence of chemical residues. On the other hand, food safety is not only characterised by the absence of residuals but is related to many hazardous risks for human health (e.g. zoonoses) that are not covered by the standards.

What are the socio-economic impacts?

Aiming at a high level of animal health and food safety inevitably increases the financial pressure on farmers. It is reasonable to assume that farmers, under such pressure, tend to work to a minimum of the requirements of the standards in order to maintain reasonable economic margins for their production. During the last decades, farmers have increasingly lost their influence on the market prices. This has happened alongside with a loss of independence in organising the farm according to the requirements of a more sustainable production system. Two relevant questions arise:

Which actions, in relation to product and process quality, are affordable to organic farmers and of interest for specific consumer groups?

To what extent are the consumers willing to pay premium prices in order to compensate for the higher cost of producing organic food?

What are special problems between current standards and reality of (organic) livestock production in different regions of Europe?

The availability of breeds and strains that are adapted to the local conditions and show a high vitality and resistance to disease is limited (especially in the case of poultry, as these species are almost entirely in the hand of a few international, conventional breeding organisations with little interest in organic livestock production).

In some regions, pasture for ruminants is not traditional, in other regions no grain is grown and getting straw for bedding is extreme expensive, or in the case of Iceland, virtually impossible.

Fish farming and other less traditional livestock production systems are regional features of organic agriculture. Detailed standards in these species are still missing.

What could be the solutions to these problems?

All stakeholders should participate in the development of standards. The needs and resources of each stakeholder group have to be discussed. The basis for such a discussion is information and education. We need to determine what type of information and education would be helpful to develop such a discussion process.

There is a large diversity in natural resources in Europe. As a result, the EEC Regulation can only set a baseline. One of the main questions is, whether an adaptation of the standards to the regional situations could be a way of improving the standard setting.

The questionnaire survey and the following work of the Working Group is expected to reflect regional and stakeholder specific diversity and to provide answers to animal health and food safety questions like:

What are the specific problems in relation to the current standards and the production reality of organic livestock systems in the different regions of Europe?

What could the steps be to solve these problems?