

## Identifying the basic normative principles for organic agriculture

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Keywords: organic principles, ethics, organic farming, development, research

### Introduction

There is an increasing interest in organic food and farming. Various countries in Europe have initiated action plans to facilitate the development of organic production, and recently the process towards a European Action Plan has been initiated (Danish Ministry of Food, 2001).

In this process, research is seen as a tool for development. To fulfil this role, research needs to be forward-looking and proactive. This can, however, only be achieved if there is some degree of consensus on where the organic movement is going. This means that the organic values need to be formulated and communicated by the relevant actors (farmers, companies, consumers, researchers, etc.). These values have already been formulated in form of a number of explicit aims (such as IFOAM's principle aims). But this multitude of aims is not very well suited to guide decisions on e.g. new research, use of new technologies, and development of organic rules. Therefore, there is a need for (a few) basic normative principles for the development of organic farming.

### Discussion

But what are the basic principles of 'how to act in an organic way'? In Denmark there has been a comprehensive discussion of this ethical question in connection with a major new organic research effort. Three related principles have crystallised in the discussion: the cyclical principle, the precautionary principle and the nearness principle. These principles have been used in an analysis of the acceptance of different technologies in organic farming and as a basis for making suggestions on future developments (DARCOF 2000).

*The cyclical principle* is a principle for how to interact with nature. It says that organic food cycles 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 prevent 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. It says that possibilities for personal experience and close contact between consumers, producers, researchers and other organic actors should be created and maintained. All relevant actors 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 cycles.

### Conclusion

We expect that there is a similar need for basic normative principles to guide the development of organic farming on an international level. However, different countries have quite different traditions and practices of organic farming, so the perceived principles may differ more or less. This paper is intended to spur an international discussion of the basic organic principles – both as a tool for the general development of organic farming and as a tool for research. This discussion can also assist international research cooperation.

### References

- Danish Ministry of Food (2001) Proceedings : Organic food and farming. Towards partnership and action in Europe.  
[See also [http://www.fvm.dk/kundeupload/konferencer/organic\\_food\\_farming/index.htm](http://www.fvm.dk/kundeupload/konferencer/organic_food_farming/index.htm)]  
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