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# How do the ethical values of organic agriculture relate to standards and to current practice?

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## Abstract
*The concern that in a growing market organic farming will be more intensive and industrialised has led to renewed interest in organic principles. This paper examines what organic values are covered by standards. It uses the ethical value basis of organic agriculture as described in the four IFOAM Principles of Organic Farming of Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care which encompass the values of sustainability, naturalness and of systems approach. It further explores whether these values are reflected in current organic farming practice and what challenges arise from them in relation to the future development of organic farming.*
**Keywords:** Organic Farming, Standards, Ethical value

## Introduction
The growing market for organic food involving large companies and global trade has led to concerns about a lack of respect for the core values and principles of organic farming. For example, Guthman (2004) was concerned about the increasing involvement of agri-business creating a lighter version of 'organic' vegetable growing in California by influencing both the rule setting (standards) and the agronomic practice. Such 'conventional' organic farming would be conducted in a more intensive, industrialised fashion and no longer function effectively as more sustainable alternative (Reed, 2005).
The main purpose of organic farming standards and certification is to provide a guarantee about organic production practices. The first standards were based on practices that producers were undertaking, but concerns of consumers or the general public have led to changing the standard in certain areas. For example, awareness of pesticide residues in breast milk led to a restriction of the conventional feed ingredients, and the awareness of the suffering of animals in intensive systems resulted in minimum requirements for outdoor access and space (Padel et al., 2004). Standards therefore represent a compromise between the values of different actors like consumers and producers. Nevertheless, consumers may associate a broader range of values with organic farming that are not part of the standards and producers may practise organic farming in a way that goes beyond what the standards require. The ongoing discussion about 'conventionalisation' of organic farming may well originate from differences between the value expectations and what values are explicated in organic standards.

In this paper, I will therefore examine what organic values are covered by standards. In order to do that it is necessary to identify what ethical values are considered to be at the core of the organic idea. I will further evaluate how this is reflected in current practice and what challenges arise in relation to the future development of organic farming.

**What are the ethical values of organic agriculture?**

Since 2000, there have been a number of publications aiming to identify the core value base and the principles of organic farming that guide practice (for example DARCOF, 2000; Vogt, 2000). This is comparable to deontological ethics, in which certain principles are formulated to assure respect for a range of fundamental values. Such ethical principles can function both as a source of inspiration and as setting boundaries to certain activities (Padel et al., 2007).

***Box 1: The IFOAM Principles of Organic Farming***

**Principle of health**

Organic Agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal and human as one and indivisible.

**Principle of ecology**

Organic Agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.

**Principle of fairness**

Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.

**Principle of care**

Organic Agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.

Source: IFOAM (2005)

Of particular importance for the identification of values is the formulation of agreed 'Principles of Organic Agriculture' initiated by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM, 2005). The IFOAM Principles were based on a process of stakeholder consultation and a democratic decision amongst the word-wide members of IFOAM (Luttikholt, 2007). In the preamble, these four principles of organic agriculture are clearly identified as ethical principles and as a vision to improve agriculture in a global context (see Box 1). The four principles together act as a whole and each principle also contains a set of explanations in which a range of value elements are referred to. Even if they do not necessarily use the same terms, they also refer to three integrative values that are frequently mentioned in the literature, namely sustainability, naturalness and systems thinking (see Figure 1). The core value basis of organic agriculture can therefore be described by referring to these four IFOAM principles of Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care. Identifying the value elements of the Principles is useful for further analysis and especially for the comparison with standards (Padel et al., 2007).

**Which core values are covered by standards?**

Many organic standards (including the current EU regulation 2092/91) do not clearly state the value base on which they are based and there is widespread concern that core organic values are not well represented. The production rules focus on values that are easy to codify and audit through the inspection and certification process, such as what inputs are permitted or excluded (Lockie et al., 2006; van der Grijp, 2006). Values more difficult to operationalise are not translated into rules. This includes agro-ecological systems values such as bio-diversity and nutrient recycling expressed in the Principle of Ecology. Lockie *et al*. (2006) comment also on the paucity of social considerations in most organic standards, again because of difficulties in developing auditing mechanism that refer to them.

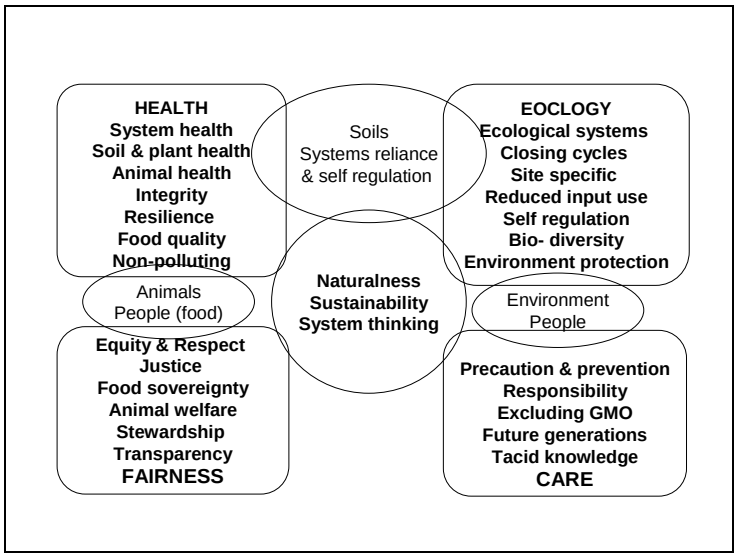


***Figure 1: Value elements in the four IFOAM Principles of Organic Agriculture***

The fact that some core values are not part of the standards does, however, not mean they are less important to organic stakeholders, as was confirmed by a comparison of core values and principles with the literature (Padel et al., 2007) and in focus group research about the values of organic stakeholders (Padel et al., 2005).

**Which values are implemented in practice?**

Producers follow minimal standards but many also adopt practices that go beyond. Much research has focused on categorising organic producers according to their value system, by identifying clusters of '*pragmatic*' and '*committed*' or '*ideological*' organic farmers (for example Darnhofer et al., 2005). Studies often use a distinction between individualistic or financial and altruistic values, producers that have more altruistic values are believed to be more organic (Meeusen et al., 2003). However, because of the well known gap between attitudes and behaviour the fact that producers have a more 'organic' value system does not necessarily mean that their practices are also more 'organic'. This type of research also ignores the learning process leading to changes in attitudes that producers undergo during conversion. For two reasons it is quite difficult to carry out a well founded assessment of the implementation of core organic farming values in practice: 1) The amount of statistical and representative survey data in relation to organic farming remains limited and 2) It would be necessary to define suitable indicators for the implementation of each of the core values.

To 1): Detailed audits of farm practices of representative samples of organic farms would need to be carried out, but the availability of statistical data remains limited (Rippin et al., 2006). As part of the Organic Revision Project we carried out a comparison of core organic values with current practice in relation to intensification (Padel et al., 2007). Intensification is characterized by higher use of production factors, in particular external inputs and resources. Organic standards regulate what inputs can be used through the positive lists (annexes) and have restricted the use of many non-organic inputs, as illustrated by the stepwise reduction of non-organic feeds introduced in the European Regulation in 2005. They have, however, been less consistent in monitoring or restricting the overall use of external inputs. For example, the amount of organic feed and the overall use of permitted fertilisers are not always limited. Certain farm types can rely to a large extent on external inputs even if these have to come from organic sources, in particular in arable, horticulture and pig and poultry production. Padel et al. (2007) concluded that some practice of organic farms that are currently permitted under the standards appears to contradict some of the values expressed in the Principles of Organic Farming, such as recycling of nutrients, the systemic approach of self-reference and self regulation, bio-diversity and environmental protection.

To 2) Implementing core values in practice is easier said than done. This is illustrated by the example of the IFOAM Principle of Fairness that states: "*Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities"*. The explanations to the principle further state that "*those involved in organic agriculture should conduct human relationships in a manner that ensures fairness at all levels and to all parties – farmers, workers, processors, distributors, traders and consumers"* (IFOAM, 2005).

The most prominent standard in this area is those of the fair trade movement which has disadvantaged producers in developing countries as its main target group[1]. Fair trade standards, however, do not consider the fairness of whole trade chain in a way that the IFOAM principle suggests. Nevertheless, they can provide some inspiration and guidance as to how aspects of the fairness principle could be implemented in organic standards. They also recognise the need for development, for example by the way in which they distinguish between minimum requirements that producers and their organizations must fulfill in order to be certified, and progress requirements that foster continuous improvement in relation to sustainable, social, economic and environmental impact.

To increase the range of values implemented in the standards it would be necessary to develop suitable indicators for more value, monitor performance in relation to them, and develop clear pass/fail criteria. This is very similar to developing tools for sustainability assessment in relation to multiple environmental, social, and economic objectives. Developing such practical tools that help farmers monitor their achievements in relation to a broad range of sustainability objectives and indicators would be a first step to raise awareness. Such tools need to approach sustainability in a very practical way and consider the relationship between various objectives, in particular between non-financial and financial outcomes of a farm. Apart from policy or market incentives, the ability to encourage farmers to strive for greater sustainability would also depend being able to predict the impacts of one particular action on the range of other sustainability objectives.

[1] www.fairtrade.net

**What are the challenges arising from the ethical principles of organic farming?**
The very reason for talking about the core values of organic farming in the sense of deontological ethics is so that they are respected in practice. IFOAM has carried out an important first step in formulating four ethical principles of organic farming. These principles gain further legitimacy through the consultation process and democratic acceptance by the membership of IFOAM.
However, formulating principles alone will not guarantee that core values are respected by organic operators. I have shown that current organic standards and certification systems only implement a proportion of the core values. Other values represent a greater challenge for implementation, as illustrated by the example of the fairness principle. Both the private (producer organisation, certification bodies and companies) and the public sector need to gain more experience how more of these core values can be reflected in the setting of standards and in the certification procedures and it is important to consider in what other ways the awareness about the organic principles among all operators can be increased. Overall, three values that are part of the Organic Farming Principles appear particularly important in this context:
**Transparency**: There should be complete openness in relation to which values are covered and not covered by standards and certification and which values express aspirations for further development.
**Participation**: A process of participative and deliberative democracy allowing representation of relevant stakeholders should be adopted in implementing core values in standards.
**Respect:** There is a need for respect among the discussion partners, which includes respect for arguments and for emotions and sensitivity for specific contexts.
Developing a common of the understanding and relating the theory (the value) to the practice should also be an important part of this ethical dialogue (Röcklinsberg, 2006).

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