

Ethical concerns associated with organic food in Europe

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Abstract

Values are at the centre of organic farming. The paper examines ethical concerns that are important to consumers, producers and other stakeholders in relation to organic farming practice and that are expressed in the four IFOAM principles of health, ecology, fairness and care. Most concerns can be categorised under four broad categories (social, economic, environmental, animal welfare) but several issues involve several dimensions. Current standards cover, both directly and indirectly, only a part of ethical values associated with organic food and agriculture but many producers aim to deliver on a broader range.

Introduction

With the growing market for organic food involving large agri-businesses and global trade there is increasing concern that core values and principles of organic farming are no longer respected. This was one of the reasons for IFOAM to consult on and formulate Principles of Organic Agriculture (POA): health, ecology, fairness and care (IFOAM 2005).

In Europe, operators can only label a food product as organic, when they follow the requirements and production rules of the Regulation (EEC) 2092/91. This regulation and national and private standards evolve continuously, and represent a compromise between the values of different actors (at a certain time).

Most current organic standards do not clearly state the values on which they are based, but some contain objectives and/or principles. The production rules explicate values that are easy to codify and audit through the inspection and certification process, such as what inputs are permitted or excluded. Values that are more difficult to operationalise (such as systems balance, social values) are not included in the rules (Padel et al. 2007; Lockie et al. 2006). Private/national standards cover similar issues but differ in the level of detail in some areas from EEC 2092/91 (Schmid et al. 2007). The paper summarises and categorises ethical issues mentioned in the literature on organic food and examines which of those are additional to current organic standards.

Approach

This paper is based on a review of the ethical concerns and values of several groups of stakeholders in organic supply chains: consumers (e.g. Zanoli 2004; Torjusen et al. 2004), producers (Padel 2005; Rymer et al. 2006), marketing & processing operators (Lauterman et al. 2005), as well as the POA and a report about basic values and organic standards (Padel et al. 2007). Ethical is hereby used in the broadest sense as referring to an action that shows concern for others and the environment.

Results

Concerns were summarised under headings and these were compared with current standards (see Table 1). Because the systems approach and animal health and welfare have received considerable attention in the European literature of organic farming, the three broad categories of sustainability were extended by a systems related issues and a category for animal health and welfare.

Of the environmental concerns minimising pollution is to a large extent directly covered by current organic standards. The sustainability of resource use and impact on climate is partly covered, in some far as some inputs are prohibited or restricted (fertiliser, pesticides, feed input) whereas for others (such as energy) reduced use can be an outcome of following the rules. Similarly, organic farming has indirect impacts on the conservation of bio-diversity (e.g. through the prohibition of herbicides and lower fertilisation intensity) although most standards do not address this area directly. The principles also refer to the innate value of nature which is difficult to cover through standards.

Animal welfare remains a controversial subject in the organic sector, but European organic standards cover some aspects of animal health and welfare. The main concerns relate to the lack of detail and to the fact that the current inspection/certification system focuses on stocking rates, pasture, housing and veterinary inputs rather than animal based indicators of health and welfare. Standards do not and cannot really cover concerns about respecting the intrinsic value of the animals.

Concerns about the fairness of organic supply chains related to various actors, but are expressed particularly about the unequal opportunities for primary producers in the present agri-food system as well as in global trade. Unlike the fair trade rules that refer to a minimum floor price for third world producers and to a social premium, current organic standards do not contain any provisions about fair prices, neither for the producer nor consumer. For consumers personal health or environmental issue may be interlinked with fairness issues. In this category also belong concerns about affordability and availability that remain strong arguments for not buying organic products, although the premium price is important to achieve a fair financial return to producers. There is no direct mention of fairness conditions in European organic standards, but they are concerned with creating a level playing field in which the same organic production rules apply to all operators that market their produce as organic.

Concerns related to social justice are raised by and refer to all actors in organic food chains, from producer to consumer. Personal health is an important reason why consumers buy organic but this review did not attempt to explore this further. Current standards guarantee that organic food has been produced and processed according to the methods specified in them using only permitted inputs, although there is some scepticism whether the claim that organic food contributes to human health is justified.

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Table 1: Comparison of key concerns with Regulation (EEC) 2092/91

Ethical concerns and values	Principles of organic Agriculture	Regulation (EEC) 2092/91*
Environmental impact		
Pollution is minimised	<i>Health</i>	<i>Largely</i>
The use of resources is sustainable	<i>Ecology</i>	<i>Partly/indirect</i>
Ecosystems/ biodiversity are respected and protected	<i>Ecology</i>	<i>Partly/indirect</i>
Impact on animals		
Practise enhance health and welfare of animals	<i>Health & Fairness</i>	<i>Partly</i>
Economic concerns		
Fair and equitable financial returns for farmers	<i>Fairness</i>	<i>Indirect</i>
Organic products available and affordable to consumer	<i>Fairness</i>	<i>No</i>
Fairness throughout the supply chain	<i>Fairness</i>	<i>No</i>
Social impact		
Food quality and safety food contributing to human health	<i>Health</i>	<i>Largely</i>
Organic food systems operate transparent and trustworthy	<i>Fairness</i>	<i>Partly</i>
A safe and equitable working environment	<i>Fairness & Health</i>	<i>No</i>
Skills, knowledge and information	<i>Care</i>	<i>No</i>
Local and regional supply chains and markets	<i>Ecology</i>	<i>No*</i>
Civic responsibility and care	<i>Care</i>	<i>No</i>
Systems focus		
Organic integrity throughout supply chain	<i>All</i>	<i>Partly</i>

*Provision in Regulation (EC) 834/2007 differs

Organic food systems must operate in a transparent and trustworthy way. When there is no trust the higher price of organic products becomes less acceptable. Consumers mention trust in relation to the origin of organic foods, methods of production and processing, distribution of profits, transport distance and packaging. Trust building factors include transparency about what is covered (or not) by standards, clear criteria for certification and strict controls as well as the possibility of personal verification through direct contact.

Organic principles but not organic standards cover concerns for a fair, safe and equitable working environment and civic responsibility and care. Many bio-dynamic and other organic farms provide work opportunities for people with special needs but organic standards do not contain any additional requirements about working conditions, although all operators in European countries are bound by the minimum labour standards applying in each country.

Skills and knowledge are essential for all aspects of sustainable development. Organic producers value their professional knowledge, and are concerned that specialist and traditional skills are preserved. Concerns about knowledge also relate to the need for providing organic consumers with suitable information. The protection of indigenous knowledge and skills is part of the principles of organic agriculture but not the standards. There are therefore concerns whether the setting of standards respects and relates to experiences and knowledge of organic farmers, or replaces a common sense and emphasis on personal responsibility and accountability with bureaucracy (Vogl et al. 2005). The desire for simplification was one driver for the revision of European Standards in 2007 in response to the EU Action Plan 2004.

These are part of a number of reasons why producers, consumers and some organic retailers express reservation about the involvement of big business and prefer local/regional organic food networks, others are traceability and freshness. Local organic food is seen as a way to support farmers and the regional economy and as an opposition to the food industry. This justifies classifying 'local organic food' as a social rather than environmental concern, with the main ethical reasoning about fairness and justice. Strong producer consumer links have been emphasised in organic farming for a long time, but the fact that there are limitations of local marketing structure as well as a free trade orientation of current markets are likely to be main reasons why these preferences were not regulated in the organic standards, unlike fair-trade standards that include a requirement to buy directly from a producer or co-operative. Regulating the distance that food travels alone may not necessarily deliver on all the expectations that rest on it. The new European Regulation (EC) 834/2007 will include the requirement that the origin of raw material has to be shown on the label.

The principles but not the standards refer to civic responsibility and care of organic operators.

The principles of organic agriculture emphasise a systems (or holistic) approach, that relates to ecological, economical and social aspects, both in a local and global setting. This is expressed in some but not widely explicated in standards. Concerns about integrity refer to the comprehensive implementation of organic standards throughout the supply chain. In the EU all actors involved have to comply with the Regulation but there are concerns about the coherent interpretation of derogations. Integrity, however, can also be interpreted as an achievement of the aims of organic agriculture going beyond the minimum required by the standards.

Conclusions

The review shows that additional concerns expressed in relation to organic agriculture can be summarised under four categories of social, environmental, economic and animal welfare. The systems approach advocated by organic farming illustrates that these categories are connected.

Current organic standards address only a proportion of these concerns directly; others are a likely outcome if current production rules are followed but several ethical concerns and values are not covered. Standard setting may take up some issues in future. For example, some private standards and the new European Regulation (EC/834/2007) refer to a broader range of values as objectives and principles of organic agriculture than Regulation (EEC 2092/91). Several values not yet expressed represent aspirations (such as respect for nature) that will remain difficult to operationalise in the form of pass/fail criteria required for certification. These values can only be realised voluntarily and education is important.

Consumers may expect organic produces to stand for a broader range values than standards alone can guarantee and even some of the core claims (e.g. food quality) remain contested. This discrepancy between expectations and standards can be viewed as a threat to the integrity of organic farming. However, it can also be seen as an opportunity for some organic operators (including certification bodies) to differentiate themselves and their products in an increasingly competitive market. Many producers practise organic farming in ways that goes far beyond the minimal requirements of standards and set examples for the delivery on a broader range of organic values and sustainability goals.

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