

# **Interest Groups and the Governance of Growth in Organic Farming<sup>1</sup>**

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## Introduction: Group ‘Capacity’ and Public Policy

By whatever mode group input to public policy is obtained, whether by participation, consultation, bargaining or deliberation, it is sought on the grounds that the group has something valuable to offer. Groups are valuable because they are ‘capable’. The literature conceptualises capacity in a multi-dimensional manner: a checklist of possibilities emerges<sup>2</sup>. Groups are capable because they have information, and they provide policy ideas and relevant facts and figures. Where the ‘representativeness’ of groups is high, they can also enhance acceptance of the policy outcome amongst important constituencies. For example, Maloney et al (1994, 36) list the ‘resources’ that groups might exchange with policy makers for access as ‘knowledge, technical advice or expertise, membership compliance or consent, credibility, information, implementation guarantees’. More recently, Bouwen refers to a similar list of ‘resources’ but refers to them as ‘access goods’ that groups use to get access to policy processes (2002). In the context of industry policy, Bell (2006) deploys the benchmark measure of ‘capable’ associations. The concept of ‘group capacity’ clearly has currency.

This rather general approach is repeated in the general public policy literature that views ‘associative’ capacities as critical to generating ‘governing’ or ‘transformative’ capacity (see Atkinson and Coleman 1989; Peters 2005, 80; Painter and Pierre 2005, 11; Weiss 1998). For instance, Peters (2005, 80) suggests that the ‘capacities of society’ are crucial to the ‘capacity to govern’. He says ‘If we continue to use the logic of mutual cooption to understand the relationship between private sector actors in governance, then actors who bring little or nothing to the table are of little value as partners’. But what is it that would (ideally) be brought to the table? What capacities are required? Here Peters (2005, 80) identifies ‘...the capacity to deliver the commitment of its members and/or other actors in the policy sector’ – that groups having been involved in decision making will go along with the decision. He also identifies ‘information about the wants, needs and demands of their constituents’. Painter and Pierre (2005, 11) suggest that groups help the state ‘acquire essential knowledge, while cooperative relations with them also ensure compliance’.

It is relatively easy, as evident above, to list off the group capacities that may be considered, in a general sense, to be policy relevant. But if such formulations are to make sense in identifying the ‘particular’ contribution of groups to governing capacities in a given policy area, we surely need a more nuanced understanding of group capacity. The immediate problems with the existing approach are threefold. Firstly, groups are surely not all *equally capable*. Resource levels, encompassingness,

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<sup>2</sup> In the corporatist inspired literature the capacity of groups to translate bargained agreements into action by the rank and file membership is of particular importance in delivering workable policy (see Schmitter and Streeck 1981). Groups are valuable to the extent that they can work on their constituency to achieve ‘compliance’ and to ‘discipline’ members: that they have autonomy in their own right. The ongoing viability of such corporatist policy arrangements is closely linked to the ability of business and labour groups to reproduce these core capacities.

staff professionalism, indeed all the ‘capacities’ listed above, vary within group populations. Secondly, group policy capacity is to some extent likely to be a by-product of broader organisational survival prospects. Developing policy capacity is likely to be partly contingent on fulfilling more basic group ‘needs’ like income and member support. Lastly, policy context surely shapes what constitutes a ‘capacity’: particular policy contexts would seem to demand different capacities. Put simply, the extent to which group capacities are ‘valuable’ is a context specific matter. This suggests that as specific policy contexts change over time established groups may need to *renew* capacities to maintain policy relevance. Stated in the reverse, if groups simply ‘maintain’ original capacities they are likely to become less relevant over time as circumstances change.

In this paper we explore the last issue by analysing the link between the design of organic farming policies and capacity development among organic sector groups. We ask how interest group capacity co-evolves with changing public policy strategy. Saliently, the existing public policy literature *does* say something about the relationship between policy context and group capacities. Focussing on the broad shift to neo-liberal policy programs and internationalizing policy spaces, most scholars ponder the ongoing relevance and capacity of ‘traditional’ business or industry groups. But, it is largely (and in our view unnecessarily) a pessimistic analysis in relation to the issue of capacity development. The implicit approach is to conceptualise group capacity as generated within, and thus rooted to, certain historical policy contexts or conditions. New policy contexts, particularly of the neo-liberal variety, demand ‘new’, and better adapted, groups. Groups may try to stretch – adaptive efforts are implied – but they find capacity renewal difficult.

In this paper we probe the issue of developing capacity by exploring the organisational evolution of the key organic interest groups in Australia, the UK and Denmark. A comparison of the Organic Federation of Australia (OFA), the British Soil Association (SA) and the Danish National Association of Organic Farming, NAOF (later the National Organic Association, NOA) is particularly useful in investigating the nuts and bolts of interest group capacity development and adjustment. They emerged from a similar milieu; yet they developed their capacities very differently. While all three associations have developed capacities for the promotion of the organic sector in relation to consumers, farmers and government, they differ significantly in relation to capacity development as it pertains to policy implementation. The key differences can be explained by variation in the organic farm policies of the three countries. The comparison also demonstrates that existing groups can adapt capacities when policy changes, even where neo-liberal inspired policy strategies are deployed.

## Theoretical Approach: Developing ‘Group Capacities’

Asking questions about the development of group capacities *should* be the domain of group specialists. However, it is not well addressed in the dedicated group literature. While group scholars would no doubt agree that variation in capacities exist, the specialist literature does not offer much in the way of tools to conceptualise and explain such differences: either within group populations or over the life-course of an individual group.

Capacity should be viewed as developmental. But the dedicated group literature is weak in this regard. The interest group literature has tended to focus upon the ‘event’ of birth or formation (see Olson 1965, Salisbury 1969). After this ‘event’, groups simply exist – ‘maintained’ by the efforts of group ‘entrepreneurs’ who ensure incentives to sustain member support while pursuing policy influence (Wilson, 1973; Moe 1980). While this approach correctly asserts ‘business-like’ considerations – like financial security - as perhaps *the* basic preoccupation for group leaders (see Salisbury 1969; Wilson 1973), it also seems to significantly underplay the dynamism of groups *during* their life course. Maintenance is surely an activity common to all groups: but underpinning organisational conditions is part of creating a platform to engage in ‘something more’. But, maintenance, and incentive management, suggests bland stasis in relation to group organisations. Once created, groups simply exist. The population ecology approach has recently dominated discussion of group survival, implying that poorly adapted groups are ‘selected out’ and new better adapted models emerge (Nownes 2004; Gray and Lowery 2000). But this approach curtails and discourages questions about whether organisations seek to adapt to conditions.

Recent group analysis has suggested a focus on group evolution (Halpin and Jordan, *forthcoming*). It has been argued that a new account could conceive of group leaders, confronted with ever changing (and probably challenging) environments, as *seeking* to adapt and transform organizational form in order to continue to survive. Groups are ‘maintained’ in diverse ways, for varied reasons and informed by different images or identities. This being said, adaptations are likely to be heavily constrained by the type of external pressure, the internal group politics, organisational history, policy demands and the leaders’ experience, assumptions and capabilities (see Halpin 2005, esp. Chp 1). While the group literature *is* tentatively considering the issue of adaptation, it does not do so in a way that is directly sensitive to policy context. However, there is some consideration of capacity development in the literature on associative governance. And this provides a promising starting point with which group scholars might engage.

As outlined in the introduction, there has been a degree of speculation about the role of associative governance in neoliberal and globalised policy contexts. Coleman notes, ‘Interest associations might not be expected to fare well as governance mechanisms in [a] neoliberal world’ (1997, 128). As Coleman (1997, p.132) elaborates;

... the processes involved in the internationalization of economic activity do not appear to favor associational governance. They promise to destabilize memberships, possibly to the point that the association may be forced into mergers or even defined out of existence. They favor developments in the policy process that may undermine cooperative behaviour between the state and collective interests. As cooperation decreases, associations will lose their access to some information, may cut back on their own policy research, and thus may become less autonomous from members. Without this policy expertise and autonomy, they become less able to exercise a governance role.

The claim is that industry associations will not be able to reproduce important capacities. Moreover, the pursuit of market modes of governance would, at face value, seem to imply less need by the state for the type of policy bargaining envisioned in many accounts of group-state interaction. Collectively, these contemporary trends act on groups from above (reconstituting state-group relations) and below (reconstituting group-constituency relations). As Coleman (1997, p.147) colorfully puts it, 'As an actor, the association takes on the image of a dinosaur – old, lumbering, and soon to be extinct'.

However, Coleman observes that many associations persist in neoliberal and globalised policy contexts. Why could this be? Coleman argues that states need for groups: shaping economic and industry policies in the emerging liberalized world may be assisted by a '*redefinition and strengthening of the role of associations*' (Coleman, 1997, p.142, *italics added*). The ongoing importance of associations is attributed in part to the technical and complex nature of policy making: they have information, expertise and implementation capacities that the state still needs. In sum, the exchange of resources continues despite neoliberal change. The continued relevance of groups is also evident where market mechanisms seem unable to deal with 'externalities', such as environmental harm, socio-economic distress and inequality (Coleman, 1997, p.128). On this basis, there is ample counter evidence to suggest, as Lofgren (2001, p.80, *emphasis added*) argues, that amidst neoliberal policy programs and global change there has been 'no decline in *the states need to draw on organized interests for policy deliberation, design, implementation and legitimacy*'.

As Bell (2005) points out, Coleman's works deals with the fate of interest groups who were partners of the state in the postwar era. As such, his analysis assumes a *shift* to neoliberalism is the major challenge confronting groups. While *other* challenges face groups that were 'born' within a neoliberal environment, the broad question of adaptation or co-evolution of capacities remains. Organic sector groups have emerged as partners for the state in the neo-liberal era, assisting the state in dealing with issues of market failure. Since conventional farming produces a number of un-priced externalities such as pesticide residuals in ground and surface water, there is a case for state-sponsored promotion of organic food production.

While, in principle, group capacity development is entertained, the question of how this emerges in particular policy contexts remains understudied. How do *individual* groups in *particular policy contexts* – but within the same broadly neoliberal and globalised market and policy environment - actually *develop* capacities over time? *Capacity development* is a process influenced by external as well as internal factors. For many groups public policy forms an important part of the context within which they act. To varying extents they are able to influence this context; however, they are rarely in a position solely to control policy development. Government and political parties, as they respond to various calls for change and adjustment of policy, may decide to overrule the opinion of groups to pursue broader societal, party political or bureaucratic goals, or they may pursue the interests of competing interest groups. In other words, interest groups are policy *takers* as well as policy *makers*. Policy change may demand new types of group resources to bring about successful implementation. The question is can groups respond? And, if so, how do they respond?

### **Organic Farming Policies and Associative Capacity Development**

If policy context is likely to set the types of group capacities required, then we need to distinguish between significantly different policy contexts. The basic choice governments face with respect to policy issues is whether or not to intervene in a sector. Non-intervention can take various forms. Government can decide to leave an issue to market forces, civil society or to households (Vedung 1998, 23-24). By contrast, when governments intervene they have a number of instruments at their disposal. Most often public policies are composed of a mix of several policy instruments; only rarely do policies rely on a single instrument to sustain a preferred situation or bring about change. The more interventionist policies are, the more likely they are to rely on a *mix* of instruments. It is the combination of policy instruments which define policy and therefore it is important to establish how ‘various policy instruments ... [are] packaged into overall programmes or comprehensive policies’ (Vedung 1998, 39). In this section, an organic farming policy instrument typology is presented.

Table 1. Organic farming policy instrument typology

Supply-side policy instruments (push)		Demand-side policy instruments (pull)	
Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect
<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversion subsidies</li> <li>• Subsidies once converted</li> </ul>	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subsidies for organic extension services</li> <li>• Support for education of organic farmers</li> <li>• Grants for organic research</li> <li>• Processing subsidies for organic produce</li> </ul>	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compulsory public purchase of organic produce</li> <li>• Consumer subsidies</li> </ul>	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State accreditation, or operation, of organic certification schemes and labels</li> <li>• Marketing support for organic produce</li> <li>• Subsidies for organic product development</li> </ul>

The typology distinguishes between supply-side and demand-side policy instruments. Supply-side policy instruments are, directly or indirectly, aimed at increasing the supply of organic produce through the creation of incentives for farmers to convert to organic farming. Demand-side instruments are, direct or indirectly, aimed at motivating consumers to purchase organic food. The typology (Table 1) should be applied with care.

Governments who have engaged in promoting the growth of the organic food sector rarely use a single instrument, but apply a mix of instruments. The specific combination of instruments reflects the broader policy strategy applied. One can distinguish between three overall types of policy strategies.

- Non-interventionist strategy
- Demand responding strategy
- Demand creating strategy

In the non-interventionist strategy, growth of the organic food sector is left to market forces, civil society and the household. Within this strategy the state can perform a limited role in terms of ensuring that market forces operate effectively. Market forces would ensure that demand and supply would reach equilibrium and thus decide demand and supply. Civil society is also allowed to influence supply and demand by, for instance by organising organic interest groups to directly promote the industry and thus influence farmers' decisions on whether or not to convert and purchasing decisions of household.

The demand responding strategy is an interventionist policy strategy in which government defines its role as responding to consumer demand for organic produce, ensuring that it is met by creating incentives for increased supply. Further, the state is likely to get involved, either directly or indirectly, in setting organic standards and establishing certification bodies to guarantee consumers that organically labelled produce is organic. However, policy efforts are clearly focused on operating supply-side instruments such as conversion subsidies and the provision of specialised organic extension services to farmers.

While, the demand responding strategy has modest ambitions, the demand creating strategy aims at actively promoting the organic food sector through efforts to increase both supply and demand for organic food. The policy is composed of a variety of policy instruments directed at changing both farm conversion and consumer behaviour.

The major impact of these policy strategies on interest groups' capacity development relates to implementation of policy. The policy strategies influence implementation capacity development within organic interest groups differently. *Non-interventionist policy strategies* have no direct impact on interest group capacity development; in fact they can prevent interest groups from developing capacities. Where there is no state 'partner' with which to engage, then groups find it hard to identify a 'policy' context to mobilise around. In such cases, collective action may still emerge but it will likely target market spheres of activity. In the absence of any state activity, organic interest groups in such contexts would focus upon capacity development in relation to 'internal' sector issues like certification and education, which, paradoxically, may thereafter become roadblocks to a capable explicitly political organisation.

*Demand responding strategies* have limited impact on organic groups' development of capacities directly related to implementation because the state would be less dependent on these because it already has implementation capacity. In the agricultural sector, states have developed capacities to govern supply of various agricultural commodities. It has built capacity in subsidising individual farmers to encourage them to produce (or not produce) desired outcomes both in terms of traditional agricultural products and public goods such as environmental services. Further, states have developed capacity in managing supply on individual farms. Since demand responding organic policy strategies concentrates on influencing supply, rather than demand, the supply-side orientated nature of traditional agricultural policies implies that the state has limited need for interest group capacities in policy implementation. Rather, the state would need interest groups in policy formulation to provide systematised information to government on developments in consumer demand and in supply and to confer legitimacy on policy design. As a result, interest groups' capacity development would be aimed at policy formulation, concentrating on demonstrating the need for state intervention and to provide the information needed for such intervention.



*Demand creating strategies* have a much more profound impact on interest groups' capacity development. Since agricultural policies are supply-side orientated and have downplayed the demand-side or the market, states have to limited expertise in creating demand. However, states may possess some demand side-orientated capacities in the organic farming sector such as the ability to set-up and operate certification bodies, or accredit and inspect private certification bodies. Performing these roles are not significantly different from other types of food safety and quality control functions in which states have been involved over time, and therefore states possess organisational experiences which could applied in certification. Nonetheless states possess very limited administrative resources relating to demand creation market organic produce. Such efforts requires organisation, skills and experiences in marketing campaigns, capacity in coordinating marketing activities with producers, processors and retailers. When states pursue a demand creating policy strategy without having in-house capacities to implement such policies, organic industry associations will may strong motivations to develop such capacities and may be in a position to link state objectives with the market behaviour of producers, processors, distributors and retailers and produce successful implementation.

### **Organic sector policies in Australia, the UK and Denmark**

The three group case studies we review operate in a similarly neo-liberal policy context. It is true that the UK and Denmark, by contrast with Australia, are subject to the not insignificant state regulation associated with the Common Agricultural Policy. However, both countries are well understood in the comparative agricultural policy literature as states with neo-liberal stances (Daugbjerg 2008, Grant 1996, 62, 160, 181). Though the three countries have a commercial approach to the agricultural sector and hold liberal positions, they have developed significantly different organic sector policies. This section compares the policies of the three countries.

#### *Australia*

Export access has been the driver for what little governmental engagement has occurred in the organic sector. Governmental recognition of the industry first came with a 1989 discussion paper within The Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) calling for a national approach to certification. The aim was for Australia to gain access to export markets which existing private certification alone would not easily permit. The Federal Government became more fully involved when in 1990 it helped establish the Organic Produce Advisory Committee (OPAC) (see May and Monk 2001, 4), a body formed to develop a national export standard. Currently, the Federal Government regulates organic exports via a government to government certificate (The Export Control [Organic Produce Certification] Orders). A 'National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce' compiled by an industry committee (Organic Industry Export Consultative Committee - OIECC) under the auspices of AQIS, provides guidance for private certifiers who enforce private standards that must exceed the National Standard in order that they are recognised

certifiers by AQIS. In essence, the state regulates certifiers, who in turn certify producers. Although, the state has recently sought to transfer this task to a industry based body regulated by Standards Australia (see Halpin and Daugbjerg 2008).

The Australian organic industry does not receive any direct targeted assistance from the state. It does receive funding via the tax payer funded Organic Subprogram of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC). Research and Development funding for the organic sector has been very modest – some say less than the levy income organic farmers pay into industry funded schemes (see Wynen 2003). Organic enterprises are able to receive funding as part of general agricultural or rural industries assistance programs, such as the Farm Innovation Program and New Industries Development Program (NIDP). But this is not by virtue of the organic nature of the enterprises; they are treated as generic – albeit ‘innovative’ – farm businesses. Though state intervention is not totally absent, it is minimal. Therefore the Australian organic sector policy comes *close to being non-interventionist*.

#### *United Kingdom*

According to Tomlinson (2007, 39), up until the 1980s, the state had been ‘conspicuous by its absence’ from the development of the organic sector. Early requests in the 1950s from the fledgling Soil Association (SA) for support – subsidy for organic fertiliser, standards for organic compost, research into organic methods – were rebuffed (Tomlinson 2007, 39). A change of mood was evident in the 1980’s, brought about, in part, by the ‘crises’ in UK conventional agriculture (Clunies-Ross 1990). But even such promising conditions for organic development, a period in which major stakeholders were willing – or had no choice – but to admit problems with the ‘conventional’ model, did not result in broad state engagement with the sector. But it did give impetus to the evolution of the Soil Association.

Perhaps the most significant early engagement of the state with the sector was the establishment of the UK Registry of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS) in 1987 (Tomlinson 2007, 142). As the certifier of certifiers, it became the first dedicated forum for state and sector interaction. It incorporated the BOSC members<sup>3</sup> in addition to MAFF, supermarkets and consumers. Incrementally more generous state support – mostly for conversion – has been forthcoming, through the Organic Aid Scheme (1994), the Organic Farming Scheme (1999) and through measures

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<sup>3</sup> There were several organic groups in the UK movement at the time that worked together on standards, forming the British Organic Standards Committee (BOSC) in 1981.

associated with the 2002 Organic Action Plan (for details see Daugbjerg, Tranter and Holloway, forthcoming). Latterly the state has funded scientific research into organic farm systems and funded information and advisory service (OCIS). While public financial support for the organic farming sector is linked to environmental care, rural development or health agendas, the state confirms this is because it rests on firm market demand – the organic sector is a vehicle for achieving public goods via the market.

Perhaps the key feature of the state's engagement with the organic sector is its continued insistence that the sector should rest firmly on consumer demand. The work by Tomlinson (2007, 144-5) cites continued Ministerial and Departmental statements reasserting that their main interest is in meeting consumer demand – where it exists – and not in creating demand. They became marginally more concerned with supply side issues in the context of import-replacement: making sure UK producers meet UK demand. Farmers are encouraged to meet demand, and the state suggests it will assist that, but it is not in the business of *creating* demand (Tomlinson 2007, 145) Thus, the British organic sector policy is characterised by a *demand responding strategy*.

### *Denmark*

The Act on Organic Farming was adopted in 1987. It had two main components. Firstly, subsidies were provided to ease farm conversion and to initiatives related to processing, marketing and distribution of organic food. Secondly, a state certification system for organic farming was introduced (the 'Ø' label). Until 1989, when the state certification became fully operational, certification was carried out by NAOF. In contrast to UK organic farming policy, the Danish policy has been less stable. Policy development over the recent two decades has been characterised, firstly, by attempts to design organic farm subsidies to motivate particular groups of farmers to convert by applying a trial-and-error approach. In the early 2000s it was realised that the organic subsidy scheme had to be simplified and, after several years with considerable overproduction of organic milk and cereals, it was decided that support schemes directed at selective commodity groups had to be abolished. The market, rather than selective support schemes, was perceived as a better means to determine the level and type of organic production (interview, Directorate for Food, Fisheries and Agri Business, 13 December 2007). Therefore, in 2004 flat-rate conversion and permanent organic payments replaced the complicated and commodity differentiated subsidy system. Secondly, significant economic resources and effort had been devoted to create demand for organic produce.

Considerable funding for organic research and development, marketing, information and food innovation has been provided. State funding for product innovation and marketing increased by more than 350 percent from 27 million DKK in 1994 to 97 million DKK in 1996 when it peaked. Spending was dramatically reduced when the Social Democratic led government resigned in late 2001 and was replaced by a Liberal-Conservative government which cut down funding for organic product innovation and marketing down from 52 million DKK in 2002 to 10 million in 2005. Increased demand for organic food domestically and internationally persuaded the government to increase funding to 40 million DKK in 2007. In contrast to the arms-length organic certification system in the UK in which the state certifies non-government certifiers, state engagement in the Danish organic sector entailed a shift from certification by non-state bodies to a fully state operated certification and labelling system (the Ø-label). Until 1989 the NAOF was the main organic certifier, setting its own standards and carrying out their own farm inspections. The strong emphasis on state-sponsored active marketing of organic produce leaves no doubt that the Danish government is pursuing a *demand creating policy strategy*.

### **Group Implementation Capacities**

For our purposes, organic sector groups provide a particularly interesting insight to capacity development in a policy context. They emerged from a similar milieu, initially sharing a number of organisational features. Their roots date back to the 1970s, they were established by people outside the established farming community and, in contrast to traditional farm groups, they have a consumer membership component. They were also founded against the backdrop of a movement style network of farmers exchanging best practice farming techniques and on-farm research. Likewise, they were instrumental in initial standards development and early certification schemes. Yet they *developed their capacities very differently*.

On the basis of the policy classification developed above, our hypothesis suggests that the Australian non-interventionist organic sector policy would not have much impact on organic interest group capacity development. As to Britain, the hypothesis suggests that organic interest group capacity development as a consequence of the demand responding policy strategy would be aimed at policy formulation, concentrating on demonstrating the need for state intervention and to provide the information needed for such intervention. On the basis of the hypothesis we would expect that the Danish demand creating policy strategy would provide incentives for organic interest associations to develop organisation and capacities related to marketing of organic produce.

## *Australia*

Organic agriculture having been practised for over 40 years in Australia (see Clay 1999; Wynen 1992). Historically, certification companies have functioned as *de facto* industry groups, but they have had geographical biases and reinforced differences between organic and biodynamic sub-sectors. The only body that can claim to be a national organic body without affiliation to a certification body is the Organic Federation of Australia (OFA), which was established in 1997. The creation of the OFA was initially envisaged by key industry players as assuming the role of industry leadership from the Organic Produce Advisory Committee (OPAC). It is attempt to integrate producer, processors, wholesalers, retailers and consumers into a single structure. But while recent media releases proclaiming ‘Australian organic Industry Unites under OFA’ create an impression of unity and thus organisation, these claims belie ongoing difficulties in organising the industry at both state and national levels, and within and across elements of the supply chain.

Reflecting Australia’s federal structure, attempts to form state and national bodies have been numerous. Most have emerged from among the certifiers, or from the OFA, or state Departments of Agriculture. There is a clear lack of leadership, with civil servants talking to one group while being told they do not speak for other important elements. Key actors refuse to accept industry wide platforms. While the Organic Federation of Australia promises (and claims) a national umbrella role, this is contested by, among others, the Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA) (formerly a certifier/cooperative but in 2002 separated from this business and now the only other industry body with ambitions for national coverage). Indeed the BFA claims to be the largest national representative organic body in Australia.

The Organic Federation of Australia (OFA) lacks capacity. It has no full time staff, and runs entirely on unpaid volunteers (a mix of farmers, consultants and academics). By contrast, some of the certifiers, and the BFA in particular, are well resourced. They have professional staff, a head office and access to lists of farmers. More importantly, they have a history of dealing with the state via their role in developing and maintaining the organic export standards. But certifiers vary in professionalism and capacity. Some will not engage in the ‘industry’ at all, particularly the Biodynamic sector. This creates a further problem for government. It cannot work with just one or two certifiers lest it be seen to favour one commercial set-up over another.

The fact that it is not able to grant resources to the OFA to do industry development work (such as the recent Industry Profile), as it attracts criticism from *within* the industry that OFA is unrepresentative, highlights the lack of an authoritative industry leadership to work with. Another consequence of the OFA's capacity deficit is that it is no more than an observer as consultants, food companies, certifiers and exporters develop Food Industry Strategies for important organic supply chains. The OFA are passive observers, which is a stark contrast to the role of the conventional farm associations and related groups within conventional farm policy and program development.

But there are signs that the federal (and some state) governments are interested in ascertaining the strength of the OFA and in developing associative structures. But, as discussed above, this is more in relation to the state *handing over* what little direct role it has in regulating the industry. A recent media release from the Parliamentary Secretary responsible for organic farming stated that in addressing its many challenges, the industry '...must work together under the leadership of the Organic Federation of Australia to ensure continued success'. The state recognises it needs an authoritative body, but till now it has been frustrated in associative capacity building. The legacy of the state's non-interventionist strategy in the organic sector has been to dampen efforts at capable industry associations. In lieu of such a body, certification organisations remain strong, not least because they can deliver what is needed: a system to certify food to meet small levels of domestic demand.

### *The UK*

The Soil Association was established in 1946 under the guiding hand of Lady Eve Balfour. Its founders were not all dedicated farmers but a diverse mix of individuals, mostly of high social status. The dual purposes of the SA at formation were research and education. In the early period, however, research dominated. If anything, it resembled an amateur-scientific society. Indeed, the Editorial to the Summer 1950 issue of *Mother Earth* refers to the Soil Association as an 'agricultural research organisation', which seems perhaps the most factual description of its then functions and practices (p. 1). A key plank of the early organic movement's strategy was the scientific trialling of organic methods at the Haughley Research Farms. Even at this early stage, the present day importance of engaging with consumers was evident: indeed it was central. At formation Eve Balfour states 'The Soil Association has been designed to create a great body of biological knowledge of the life of the soil, and to distribute that knowledge far and wide to the

consumer as it accrues to the cultivator' (Mother Earth 1946, v1.p. 6). The SA was also involved in the development of the first set of UK farm standards in the late 1960's. In 1973 the 'Soil Association Marketing Company Ltd (now Soil Association Certification Ltd) was formed to both certify and promote organic produce.

Scholarly accounts<sup>4</sup> of the Soil Association suggest quite a clear cut difference between the pre and post 1980's (Reed 2004; Tomlinson 2007). A new leadership cadre took over in the early 1980s, motivated by their desire – and the previous incumbents' reluctance – to engage in trade and market based issues *and* to adopt a more campaigning stance. Tomlinson observes of this period 'At the beginning of the 1980's the organic movement began to diversify away from its previous scientific preoccupations, not least with a focus on the marketing aspects of organics' (2007, 151). Reed goes further, noting that the aim 'to co-ordinate research and provide information on Organic Farming' had been eclipsed by 'a more aggressive and outward facing policy' (2004, 255). The new leadership was largely from non-farming backgrounds and met in and around non-farm campaigning events (Reed 2004, 254). According to Reed it 'promoted the importance of consumer power' (2004, 257). The Soil Association was to be taken forward by an even more explicit focus on *direct* engagement with consumers – in fact mobilising them into supporting the Association, and using them to drive political and commercial actors to develop an organic market. A report of the Extraordinary Council Meeting of 1982, where this leadership change was brought about, confirms that financial considerations were a key factor in bringing on a leadership coup. The difficulty in securing funding for the SA especially in respect to maintaining quality organic research was raised (Quarterly Review, March 1982, 1). The view was that scientific work was not feasible, and the more effort should go into market development and consumer engagement. In 1985 the SA moved its HQ from Haughley Farm to Bristol.

To confirm the change of tack, the SA pursued a consumer campaign in 1983-4 ('Eat Organic Message'). It took a view that demand creation was crucial given the power of consumers – if demand was there (if it could be demonstrated) then government would have to listen to them and support the sector. The philosophy was 'first, build its production base...and its ability to educate the consumer. The public, then, must emphatically demand of the government more food produced under biological systems – this pressure must then be channelled through the Ministry of

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<sup>4</sup> And recent interviews conducted by the authors with SA staff confirm this broad analysis.

Agriculture, Food and Fisheries to increase the research into organic agriculture which, together with increased product demand, will bring the much higher supplies to meet increased demand which our campaign stimulated' (Quarterly review, 1982-3 Winter, 8-9). The MAFF said as much, making clear it would respond to consumer pressure where demand is there and needs to be met. In fact, the state got involved in standards as it recognised that if consumers were paying a premium they had to be sure that they were getting what they were paying for. Mobilising consumer awareness was a key task for the SA and sat well with the states emphasis on market demand led sector development. While the SA maintained that the organic sector should and could grow beyond a niche, the state consistently framed it as a niche organic market. But this conflict was easily overcome by a common concern with market development.

This isn't to say that the SA was not engaged in other lobbying activities. The BSE, mad cow and other food scares in the 1990s prompted renewed attention to organic farming, and the Association was well placed to respond. They engaged with the state over drawing up the Organic Aid Scheme in 1993, and the subsequent programs which supported conversion (see above). But this was recognition that the campaign and market strategy had worked – the state accepted demand existed. The SA was involved, for a short time, in running a 'conversion information service' in July 1996 to increase uptake, funded by MAFF: it was subsequently overtaken by MAFF/DEFRA and recently disbanded (Tomlinson 2007, p.166). At that time the SA was still a relatively small enterprise: *growing* to just 30 staff by 1997. New tasks stretched existing resources.

But the last ten years of the Association have witnessed unprecedented expansion, and with it enhanced capacities. Today's Soil Association is a large enterprise – over 200 full time professional staff engage in activities as diverse as standards development, market development, education, public affairs and policy. The supporter base is around 28000, which is relatively small for a high profile mass membership group; and particularly small as a base to sustain such a high staff compliment. Much of this expansion has been funded by increases in grants (for example from the Big Lottery fund), from increased membership, donations and legacies, resulting from more vigorous membership marketing and related activities (SA Annual Reports, Various). The growth in staff engaged in areas such as public relations and media, new regional centres/networks, school education, and the food and farming department, provides an indicator of where it has generated policy capacities. It maintains a growing network of organic farms that are visited by the general



public, a Magazine and has developed regional centres to engage more directly with local partners (and also EU, state or lottery funding) in organic food projects (the 'Food for Life' partnership – organic meals in schools, is a good example).

As one would expect, the SA has a capacity in market development. It has maintained its indirect market 'shaping role' through mass communication. The philosophy that such indirect pressure will develop the organic market runs deep in the SA. For instance, at interview, the suggestion that the SA 'negotiate' with the state or supermarkets to develop the sector gets the response 'I could get Tesco to agree to stock organic chocolate, but if it didn't sell after a week they would pull it off the shelves'<sup>5</sup>. The view is that if consumers want something – if the SA can demonstrate that – then the market actors and the state will become enrolled in meeting demand. The Soil Association does not offer consultancy to individual enterprises: farmer, processor or supermarket. However, it does engage in market development activities. The recent growth in the staff resources of the SA has engendered it with a more hands on approach than the very indirect 'environment setting' approach described above. Of course, on the supply side, the SA at formation was about fostering a research base of farmers. This has expanded to 'connecting up' farmers with other factors in the supply chain. It may assist product innovation in the sense of linking processors and supermarkets with producers (in addition to establishing relevant standards as is necessary). They run a 'Multiple Retailers Working Group' which is an information exchange between the SA and the retailers. In terms of supply and demand, the SA is active in encouraging conversion (providing general advice and targeting sectors where supply is low), fostering demand with consumers: but it also tries to 'iron out' oversupply issues by dissuading conversion where supply is likely to exceed demand (an interviewee cited the organic milk sector). They are involved in programs that put organic food in hospital and school canteens: but again in terms of resourcing projects that serve as exemplars to demonstrate what can be done. The example of Food for Life project demonstrates its deployment of media and project management capacities, along with knowledge of supply chain actors, to win lottery funds to then work to promote organic food in Schools. One staff member described their market role as 'sustaining the organic market in the overall public interest': and this seems a relatively accurate description of the logic that informs the SA's functions in this arena.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with SA senior staff, Bristol, Feb. 2008

In its own words the SA is an 'educational charity'. Its main organisational vehicle is an organisation with open affiliation to the general public. The certification service – a separate business from the charity – provides important income: the decision by the state to 'certify certifiers' as opposed to subsume the role directly (as in Denmark) has assisted SA financial viability. However, its accounts suggest that the net profit of certification activities is modest compared to the income from donations, members and legacies (SA Annual Report, *various*).

It is important to recognise that the Soil Association is a promotional group, yet it is *also* the only UK group that has organic farmers as members. It is clear that the Soil Association does not – at least publicly – claim to be a representative of organic farmers. This no doubt curtails some types of advocacy positions – for instance it does not approach negotiations with the state (say over the OAP) in sectional terms of getting as much for farmers as possible. Indeed, the SA's own reportage of the OAP process – indeed any of its lobbying campaigns directed at the state – does not find the SA reporting 'wins' in terms of money in organic farmers' pockets. However, the fact that it *does* have farmer members (and in fact, processors and retailers) does provide it with a broadened rhetorical resource base compared to a typical promotional group (say Friends of the Earth). The SA can not be criticised as *only* having ideals and lacking a concern for practice or implementation: it can retort that 'its members' are responsible for producing x value of product and managing x numbers of acres. As one SA staffer explained, 'We can walk the talk'. The SA convincingly straddles two general images of itself. On the one hand a farmers organisation and the other a campaign group.

### *Denmark*

The establishment of the Danish organic farming movement was associated with the rise of the environmental movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first organic farms were established by urban people who moved into the countryside to experiment with alternative farming and a new way of life 'as a reaction to post-war industrial society and its foundation on material values' (Ingemann 2006, 9). It was soon realised that know-how and practical advice was needed to practice organic farming. As a result, throughout the 1970s, these alternative farmers became engaged in knowledge dissemination. In 1980 a group of organic farmers took the initiative to organise the organic sector and in March 1981 the National Association of Organic Farming (NAOF) was formed. Up until the mid-1980s, the NAOF lacked regular contacts with state

agricultural and food authorities, nor with the established farm unions. This changed significantly since the Act also set up the Organic Farming Council (later renamed the Organic Food Council). In the 1990s the Council developed into the major forum for organic farm policy making. The NAOF had thus become an insider group.

As mentioned above, the Organic Act introduced a state certification and labelling system. This was a serious blow to the NAOF. The loss of certification endangered the NAOF's identity with farmers and external stakeholders (for example the state). However, the renewal of capacities to re-establish itself as relevant key partner for the state as a representative of organic sector interests could not take place within the Association but had to be developed in parallel with it. As considerable share of organic subsidies was directed towards product innovation and marketing, the NAOF were motivated to develop activities eligible to such state support. However, since the state refused to provide subsidies to such activities within the NAOF because it was considered a political organisation rather than a trade association, a new association had to be formed. Therefore in 1989, the Organic Trade Coordination Committee was formed by members of the NAOF, the established farm unions and the organic commodity sector associations which consisted of both farmers and processors (in the beginning only the dairy, vegetables, beef sectors), to coordinate and assist in organic marketing activities. It was entirely funded by state subsidies until 1992 (*Økologisk Jordbrug* no. 92/04, 1992, p. 7, interviews former OSC representative, 4 March 2008 and former OTCC employee 5 March 2008), but its capacity was limited as its staff consisted of only one employee (BKU undated).

The NAOF was deeply involved in the discussions around how to maintain the Committee into the future (*Økologisk Jordbrug* no. 98/10, 1992). Supported by the NAOF, the spokesmen of the organic commodity sectors preferred to establish a new organisation which would have only organic groups as members, bring the marketing effort closer to the NAOF and indirectly provide funding to the NAOF, for instance by buying space for articles on the organic market in the NAOF's magazine (interviews former OSC representative, 4 March 2008 and former OTCC employee 5 March 2008). They got the upper hand in the debate and in 1992 the Organic Service Centre was established as an organisation separate from the NAOF. The basic idea of the Centre was to perform as 'the farmer's extended arm to the consumer and the retailer' (*Økologisk Landscenter* undated b). The OSC took over the responsibilities of the Coordination Committee. At

one of the initial meetings of the OSC, the governing board planned to significantly expand the information activities directed towards consumers which the Coordination Committee previously had carried out. The increased activity would require additional staff (Økologisk Landscenter 1992a). In 1995, the OSC was engaged in activities such as in-store demonstrations, answering questions from consumers, carrying out analyses of retailers' needs and attitudes to organic products, producing information material, organising open farm days, participation in food fairs and exhibitions and taking care of press contacts. A highly valued activity was nourishing contacts with retailers (Økologisk Landscenter 1995). The OSC's activities would be funded by payments for services and state support for information activities (Økologisk Landscenter 1992b). Membership fees were spent on the organisational activities. A Project Department was established within the OSC and was fully funded by state subsidies.

The OSC became an organisational success. It rapidly expanded its information activities and attracted considerable funding for these through the state schemes earmarked for such activities. This implied hiring additional staff and even outsourcing of some information campaigns to consultant companies. In 1998 the OSC began to diversify its activities and engaged in export promotion activities and the first export promoter was hired (Økologisk Landscenter, undated a). The activities were funded by the land-tax foundation (consisting of land tax and pesticide tax revenues) and by the Ministry of Food through the organic policy's schemes for product innovation and marketing (Økologisk Landscenter undated b). In 1999 the OSC was strongly criticised by the Organic Food Council for doing too little in relation to marketing, in particular marketing of organic dairy products. In fact, the Council had been requesting new OSC marketing initiatives since 1996. This caused urgency and critical reflection within the OSC. It was decided to apply for the funds available for marketing in order to launch a marketing campaign for organic dairy products and apply for funding for a 'grand' campaign for organic produce. It was also realised that the OSC needed capacity in strategic marketing and that it was necessary to hire a person with such qualifications (Økologisk Landscenter 1999). The neglect of the political agenda for marketing, and the associated funds, was somewhat of a blunder given that state funding for product innovation and marketing had been increasing dramatically since the mid-1990s. Spending on product innovation and marketing was almost doubled from 1994 to 1996 and more than doubled again from 1996 to 1999.

These glorious funding times were brought to a halt when the Social Democratic led government resigned in late 2001 and was replaced by a Liberal-Conservative government which wanted to cut down on funding for various organic activities – some of them with very short notice. This caused an immediate crisis within the newly established National Organic Association (NOA) which was a merger of the OSC and the NAOF. The proposed budgetary reductions for 2002 would affect all activities within the organisation and triggered intense lobbying activities to limit the cuts, which turned out to be successful (Holmbeck 2002, Økologisk Landsforening 2003, 1). However, this could not eliminate the government's intention to cut down on funding in the longer run. Funding for product innovation and marketing decreased from 52 million DKK in 2002 to 10 million in 2005 – only a tenth of the spending in 2000. The NOA's reliance on state funding to maintain its market development capacities proved vulnerable when political cycles changed.

This change of policy forced the newly established National Organic Association (NOA) to find new sources of income to maintain their activities and become less dependent on state funding. One strategy implemented was to offer on-farm advice in addition to the R&D activities already taking place within the Agricultural Development Department. This worked out successfully and additional staff was hired (Økologisk Landsforening 2003, 21, 2004, 16). Another strategy was to enforce the effort in relation to retailers and to commercialise the Marketing Department which had developed considerable expertise in marketing of organic food. Since the late 1990s, the Department had gathered important experiences in coordinating the activities of processors, distributors and retailers in relations to sales campaigns (Økologisk Landsforening 2003, 12). In August 2002 it was decided to utilise this capacity commercially by offering advice and assistance to food processors and retailers in the field of organic sales (Økologisk Landsforening 2002, 2). The NOA successfully utilised this capacity. Close cooperation with selected food stores in the promotion of organic sales proved very successful. For instance, cooperation with the supermarkets Kvickly and Irma resulted in 26 percent and 45 percent increases respectively. The NOA also engaged in successful cooperation with the supermarket Netto and 30 processors and distributors on how to treble chain's marketing effort for organic produce (Økologisk Landsforening 2005, 26-27). In 2008 the NOA had a staff of 36. The Marketing and Agricultural Development departments each consists of seven consultants. The Communications Department also has a staff of seven. Interestingly, only four people, including the managing director, carry out political activities (Økologisk Landsforening 2008).

## **Conclusions**

The relationship between policy context and group capacities is clearly not well researched in the interest group literature. For reasons of parsimony, interest group and public policy literatures treat groups (and often interests) as unitary. While groups may not change name over decades, and as such be treated as the same actor, we assert that this obscures much changeability. Groups do a lot of peddling below the water line just to stay still. We have explored this broader issue by analysing the link between the design of organic farming policies and capacity development among organic sector groups, focusing upon the way in which interest group capacity co-evolves with public policy evolution. Our analysis revealed a clear link between policy design and interest group capacity development. We distinguished between three types of organic sector policy strategies (non-interventionist, demand responding strategy and demand creation) and explored how these three impacted on capacity development of the Organic Federation of Australia (OFA), the British Soil Association (SA) and the Danish National Association of Organic Farming, NAOF (later the National Organic Association, NOA).

Though there are signs that the federal (and some state) governments in Australia are interested in ascertaining the strength of the OFA and in developing associative structures, the state's non-interventionist strategy in the organic sector has dampened efforts aimed at developing capable industry associations and provided little incentives to organise policy relevant associative capacity. Instead, certifiers dominate in a market-based non-interventionist climate.

The British demand responding policy strategy has locked the SA into maintenance of its indirect market 'shaping role' through mass communication aimed at creating consumer awareness and thus demand for organic food. Since the British organic farming policy responds to increased demand by creating incentives to increase supply of organic food, the role of the SA is to communicate to government on increasing demand. There is, for instance, little merit in fostering a professional agricultural economics staff to match that of the Ministry – the orthodox strategy of the conventional farm unions like the NFU - when the state is not contemplating supporting organic farming through such policy exceptionalism. But where the state views satisfying consumer demand

for organic food, and correcting externalities of conventional farming (such as environmental impacts), as core policy goals, it make sense for the SA to specialise in catalysing and then demonstrating the former, while working with the green movement to establish the relative high performance of organic farming systems in addressing the latter.

The Danish demand creation policy strategy in the organic sector provides strong incentives for the NAOF to renew its capacities to become policy relevant for the state in particular in relation to the implementation of demand-side policy instruments. In addition to capacities in mass communication, the NOA has developed marketing capacities targeted at retailers. These retailer-related activities are aimed at changing consumer behaviour inside the store.

Our comparison has demonstrated that interest group capacity is surely not static but develops over time as a response to policy evolution. This implies that interest groups may have larger potentials in policy implementation than usually assumed. Particularly the Danish case illustrates interest groups may respond to changes policy by changing capacities to remain policy relevant, which is also important for survival. This finding is somewhat contradictory in relation to the existing literature on interest groups which is largely pessimistic in relation to the issue of capacity development. The implicit approach is to conceptualise group capacity as generated within, and thus rooted to, certain historical policy contexts or conditions. And, that if conditions change then group capacities may be of reduced value (Coleman and Chiassons 2002, Wanna and Withers 2000). Our study indicates that interest groups may be capable of adjusting their capacities, but to draw more firm conclusions more research is needed. Particular attention to the way group 'origins' shapes adaptive activity would be a logical extension of this work.

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