

Multicriteria assessment and communication of effects of organic food systems (MultiTrust)

PROJECT SUMMARY

Organic agriculture is an alternative food system based on consumer trust and credibility. Consumers buy organic goods and citizens and politician support organics, to some degree, because they believe it is a better alternative. And they believe this because the organic form of production seeks to meet many considerations for society, nature and environment. The possibilities for growth in organic agriculture therefore depends on whether it, overall, makes up a credible and attractive alternative, and whether the development of organics is positive with regard to the organic principles and the key societal goals for environment, health and welfare. It is, however, extremely difficult to determine whether a specific technological, management or organisational development is positive or negative, overall. There are no established methods to make overall assessments of organic food systems.

Objective and expected results

The MultiTrust project is to develop methods to make balanced overall assessments of the effects of organic food systems on environment, nature and society, and methods to communicate and use these complex assessments in practice. The twofold goal is to make the organic producers better able to develop organics in accordance with the organic principles and in synergy with societal objectives, and to make it easier for consumers, citizens and politicians to observe and evaluate the different contributions that organic food systems offer. Such tools for multicriteria assessment and communication can support an integrated and trustworthy development of organic agriculture, and thereby consolidate the long term growth of organic food systems.

Activities in the project

In the project we will work in an interdisciplinary and participatory way with an eye for the many different perspectives on organic food systems and multicriteria assessment. The key activities in the project are to:

- summarize the theoretical basis for making balanced and transparent multicriteria assessments and for communicating such complex assessments
- collect international experiences with the use of multicriteria assessment tools on food and farming systems
- prepare a framework for how such tools can be developed for use on organic food systems with their distinct practices and ethical principles
- develop and test methods for visualisation and animation that can help communicate complex overall assessments
- test concrete prototypes in cooperation with organic practitioners and stakeholders
- investigate consumer perceptions of the tools for overall assessments that are developed, and the criteria that enter.

A key question is how, where and from which perspective and which values the weighings and reductions are to be made. We will not be making tools that give one weighing and one answer like many tools for sustainability assessment do. We will make tools that enables different groups to determine which dimensions are important to include, how the necessary information can be gathered and how it can be weighed, and thereby make their own assessments of effects of specific developments in the complex field of organic food systems.

Preliminary results

It is a great strength for the project that private and public users and user representatives are partners within the project, and that there are university partners from social, human and natural sciences. As planned and expected in such an interdisciplinary and participatory project, we have used quite some time and resources on learning to understand each other and our different approaches and expectations to the project. A concrete example of this is that each project partner, including the regions and municipalities, has prepared a 'self-description' of their own perspective on the project.

Apart from helping us to better understand each other and cooperate within the project, these self-descriptions are also a first exercise in rendering visible and handling the different perspectives on the

field. The project applies a perspectivist approach, which works deliberately and openly with the different scientific and stakeholder perspectives and what aspects of organics they are able to observe. This perspectivist approach to cross-disciplinary research has been described and published in an international article (Alrøe and Noe 2011a).

Three key challenges

One of the first tasks for the project has been to identify the key challenges in developing balanced overall assessments of organic food systems. The project has identified three pivotal challenges: knowledge, values and communication (figure 1):

1. Some effects of organic food systems are well known and can be measured in a fairly simple and precise manner, while others are poorly known and difficult or expensive to investigate. The first big challenge in making overall assessments of organics is thus to keep the balance between the different types of knowledge, and to avoid that what is most precise or easiest to measure gets the most weight. At the same time it is important to understand how the different effects are connected within the system.
2. Multicriteria assessments depend on indicators, which are selected and constructed based on certain problems and goals. For instance, emissions can be measured per hectare or per kilo produce, and this does not necessarily lead to the same assessment. The second big challenge is therefore to render visible the built-in values in the assessment tools and how they relate to the ethical principles of organic agriculture, societal goals, and other interests.
3. Organic agriculture wants to be measured on the many considerations it takes into account, but more comprehensive overall assessments necessarily become more complex. The third big challenge is how such complex assessments can be communicated in an effective and participatory way. They are to be used by both scientists and stakeholders with many different perspectives, and media also play a large role when credibility and trust is constructed and negotiated. It is necessary to reduce complexity, for example by way of visualisation, but it is critical where and how it is done.

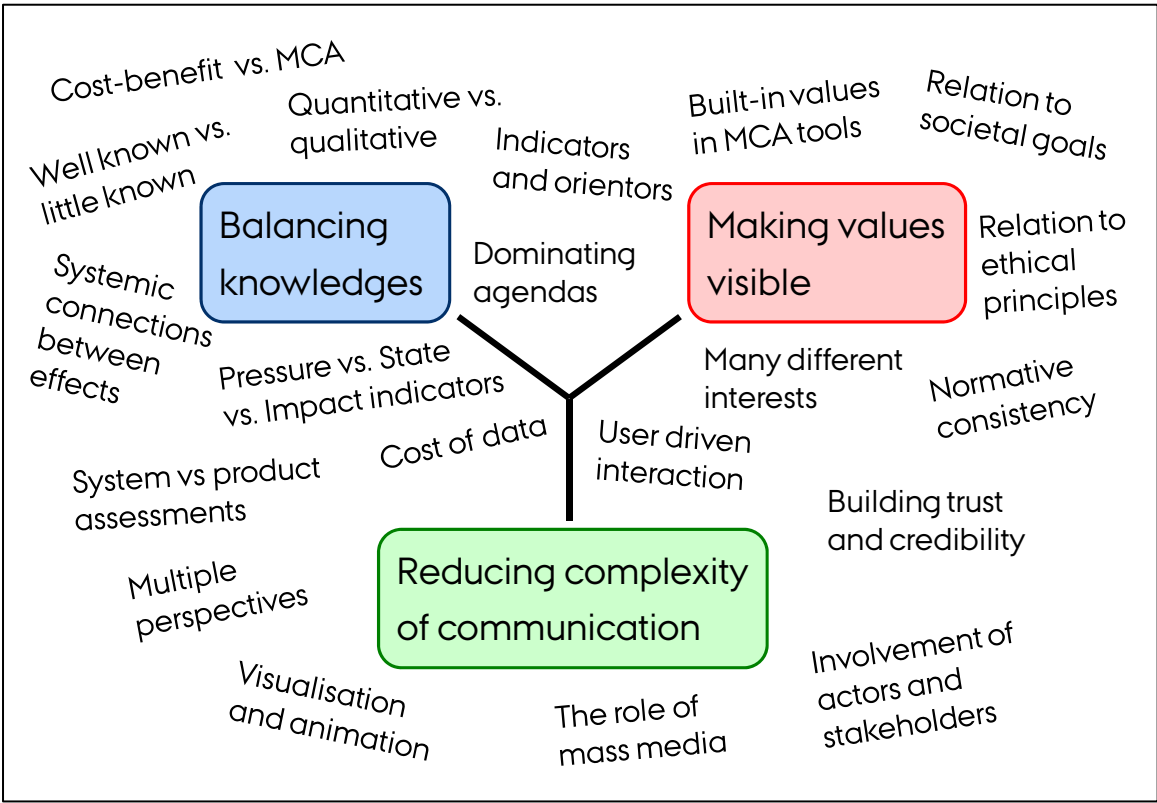


Figure 1. Three key challenges in developing balanced overall assessments of organic food systems

Presentations and international cooperation

The project has been presented at the IFOAM world Congress in Seoul, South Korea in 2011 (Alrøe and Noe 2011b), and in New Zealand where the project leader has been Visiting Academic with support from OECD, and there has been a great interest in the project from many sides and offers to enter into cooperation.

The project is taking part in the organisation of the international IFSA 2012 conference in Aarhus, 1-4 July 2012, and is responsible for a workshop on "Balancing and communicating overall assessments of food systems" together with three of the international partners in the project (http://ifsa2012.dk/?page_id=351).

Reviews and analyses

In the first phase of the project, a range of reviews and analyses have been prepared to clarify and summarize the theoretical basis for making and communicating multicriteria assessments:

- A literature review and critical exposition of approaches to assessing organic food systems with special focus on economic valuation and multicriteria analyses.
- An analysis of the normative aspects of existing multicriteria methods, compared with the ethical principles, values and goals that characterise organic production and consumption.
- A review of how to reduce the complexity that organic food systems and sustainable development involves in order to promote communication, participation and learning.
- A literature review on the construction of credibility and trust in the media and among media users with regard to a more comprehensive assessment of organic food systems.

References

Alrøe, Hugo F. and Egon Noe (2011a) The paradox of scientific expertise: A perspectivist approach to knowledge asymmetries. *Fachsprache - International Journal of Specialized Communication* 3–4/2011: 152–167.

Alrøe, Hugo F. and Egon Noe (2011b) A cross-disciplinary approach to multicriteria assessment and communication of the effects of organic food systems. *Proceedings of the Third Scientific Conference of ISOFAR, Vol. 2*, p. 313–316. Bonn: ISOFAR.

PROJECT LEADER

Hugo Fjelsted Alrøe, Associate Professor, Ph.D.
Communication, Decision-making and Ethics
[Department of Agroecology](#), Aarhus University
Email: hugo.alroe@djf.au.dk,
Web: hugo.alroe.dk



AARHUS
UNIVERSITY

PARTICIPANTS

The Departments of [Agroecology](#), [Education](#), [Business Communication](#), and [Aesthetics and Communication](#), Aarhus University, [Institute of Food and Resource Economics](#), Copenhagen University, [Knowledge Centre for Agriculture](#), [Organic Denmark](#), [Thise Dairy](#), and [Animation Hub](#), four public municipalities and regions, and nine international partners.

A full list of project participants is available on the project homepage: <http://multitrust.org>

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