

Development of organic agriculture in Belarus: main actors, challenges, barriers and first successes.

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Author's Background

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Summary

NGOs were the main actors in the field of organic farming development in Belarus. They organized seminars, published books, brochures; provided information for all stakeholders, encouraged, consulted and supported pro-organic farmers. First producers started certification process 4 years ago; 10 farms were certified accordingly EU organic rules in 2013.

However, the market of organic products is pure. There are difficulties for developing the whole chain 'producer-consumer' in Belarus. Farmers sell products by themselves and often at conventional prices. We consider lack of professional 'organic' traders as one of main barriers of organic agriculture development in Belarus.

The 2012 opened the new stage. Government authorities started state program of organic farming development in Belarus. The cooperation between authorities, scientific institutes, NGOs and agricultural producers was established. The results are scientific conferences, creation of government working group and beginning of national organic legislation elaboration.

Background

Agriculture plays an important role in the economics of Belarus with 7.9 % of GDP and 8.1 % of population employed in agricultural sector (Agriculture of Republic of Belarus, 2013). Intensive agricultural production is the major direction of agriculture development in Belarus. It demands significant subsidies and provides negative consequences on environment, including pollution of lands and water, degradation of soils.

There are four main groups of agricultural land-users in Belarus:

- 1) state large scale farms (so called SPK – agricultural production cooperatives),
- 2) private farms,
- 3) homesteads with land up to 1 ha and small summerhouse plots ("datcha") usually not more than 0.05 ha; in fact they are family farms .

In total, there is 8 726,45 559,7 thousand ha of agricultural land (5 559,7 thousand ha of arable land) in Belarus, including 86.7 % managed by state large scale farms, 1.7 % managed by private farmers, 9.9 % managed as homesteads lands and summerhouse gardens owners ("datcha"). Private farmers produce 1.45 % of total agricultural production, family farmers – 22.11 % (Agriculture of Republic of Belarus, 2013).

Land reform has not taken place in Belarus. All lands of agricultural purpose are the state property; private property is only possible for a land plot with a house and for homestead land up to 1 ha. Farmers can receive up to 100 ha of land for use, but not into property. The Government does not create favourable conditions for development of private farms in Belarus. It is difficult to rent land and find finances to start production.

Organic agriculture in Belarus began to develop later in comparison even with other post-soviet countries. The first activities starts in 2000-ies. The main barriers were absence of organic legislation and certification, lake of financial support for organic farmers, inflexible command-administrative system of management in agriculture.

The development of organic agriculture in Belarus is restrained by the absence of normative legal basis, insufficient state support, low awareness of customers and potential producers and lack of information or false information. The most common is the prejudice: "Organic products are only for rich countries, we can afford such luxury". We have heard such opinion from many persons - from the officials of ministries to agronomists working in conventional farms.

Main chapter

During last 10 years, NGOs ware main actors in the field of organic farming development. Since 2006, 'Ecohome' and 'Center of Environmental Solutions' performed numerous projects on organic farming; 'Agro-Eco-Culture' was

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established in 2013 and consolidated the most professional experts and activists. In cooperation with international NGOs they organized seminars, published books, brochures, provided information for all stakeholders. Web page concerning organic agriculture (www.agracultura.org) was developed. Two round table with participation of stakeholders were organized.

Today the most important activities include:

- Advocacy for organic legislation, cooperation with state and local authorities.
- Education for farmers – special workshops for farmers with Belarusian and international experts, study courses at organic farms in EU countries.
- Consultations for farmers on practical questions of organic production's organization and organic methods and preparation of documents for certification.
- Raising awareness of public, providing information for all stakeholders, education of consumers.

The 2012 was a turning point for development of organic farming in Belarus. In July, 2012 the Council of Ministers issued a Decree, and an action plan for development of organic agriculture in Belarus was created. The government gave special assignments to research institutes of National Academy of Sciences, Ministries of Agriculture, Economy and others. Now government declare many activities aimed at organic agriculture development: elaboration of national standards and legislation for organic agriculture, development of research scientific programs, organization of certification body, etc.

The Parliament of Belarus plan to adopt a legislation for organic production. Representatives from NGOs were actively engaged in drafting of the document. Belarusian authorities declare a necessity of development of national organic standards and establishment of national certification body. However, activities in this field are not of preferred speed and are non-transparent for public. Today there are still no laws for organic agriculture, no national standards and absence of certification organization in Belarus.

In three recent years, a cooperation between NGO and government was established. Conferences on organic agriculture took place in November 2013 and November 2014, for the first time in Belarus. Main organizers were NGOs with support of Coalition Clean Baltic. However, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection, Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supply of Belarus, the House of Representatives (chamber of Parliament), supported both conferences and took part in them. State authorities' representatives stated their support to organic agriculture. Results of the first conference were published in the Conference Proceedings. It was the first publication of scientific article in the field of organic agriculture in Belarus.

The Belarusian NGOs included scientists in organic farming activities, but the most part of agrarian researchers and professionals like agronomists were sceptic. There is no sufficient scientific research in the field of the organic agriculture in spite of rather big scientific potential: 4 agrarian universities and 7 agrarian scientific research institutes. We lack holistic approach to scientific support of organic farming in Belarus.

There are few experiences in this field in Belarus supported more by enthusiastic scientists and NGO activists than by scientific bodies or state authorities, except two directions, connected with organic farming: elaboration of plant protection preparations and crop rotation study. Three of field trials (strawberry and raspberry organic cultivation) are placed at private farmers land and show farmer's need in organic farming methodology adapted to the country conditions. Unfortunately, the scientific research on the alternative agricultural methods are financed and supported by the state to less extent.

Today there is a big interest towards scientific researches in field of organic agriculture; there is a trend to add ecological aspects to researches. At the same time, organic agriculture researches are still lacking of focus. The State Program of organic agriculture development is necessary. It should include a plan of scientific researches embracing all components of organic agriculture, including researches on economic aspects of organic management that are important for creation of a system of financial support for organic farmers.

The first and unique marketing study of consumers' preferences relating organic products in Belarus was performed in 2008 on order of NGO „Ecohome“. 95.4 % of respondents would like to buy organic products. The majority (89.4%) of them explains their choice by the fact that organic foods are good for health. Purchasing ability of Belarusians is not very high, however, more than a half of respondents (55.8%) are ready to pay for organic products more than for conventional ones. We can describe a Belarusian organic consumer on the base of obtained results: he/she is 18-29 years old, single, well educated and has more than average income. Preferred places of purchase of organic food are common food shops: the most important factors for consumers is good reputation of producer and organic label (Semenas, 2013).

However, the market of organic products in Belarus is in very beginning. It seems that producers and consumers are not able to meet each other in Belarus. Consumers are interested in buying organic products, producers start to work organically, but there are many challenges for developing the whole chain 'producer-consumer' in Belarus. We consider the absence of organic traders as a main barrier to organic agriculture development in our country. There are no favorable conditions for business in Belarus and starting retailing system need many licenses so as permissions. Additionally, organic food producers are not able to supply enough products, although some supermarkets declare readiness to open departments of organic products in the presence of year-round supply. The majority of them produce either the low quantities of many kinds of product or rather big amounts of few kinds of food.

Consumers have 2 opportunity to buy organic food: 2 internet shops and direct sells farmer-consumers (with direct home delivery of food to consumers). The prices in internet-shops are the highest, usually 100-200 % more in comparison with farmers' market of conventional food. Process of direct delivery usually are lower, +20-70 % to conventional market. Usually both retailing systems deal with seasonal products (apples, strawberries, water melons, cucumbers and other vegetables) and products which people store at home for winter consumption (potatoes, carrots, beetroot, apple juice). Producers are mostly farmers produced rather big amounts of few kinds of products. It is necessary to mark that the variety of products and their quality raised during last 3 years. Nevertheless, the main problem is overrated expectation of consumers. They require the same quality of organic product as of conventional one, but farmers are not very experienced and are not able to provide high quality sometimes. The most of them have difficulties with plant protection and pests and diseases often damage plants. On the other hand, some farmers are sure that they do not need to provide quality because organic products must be unattractive and 'organic' origin is sufficient to satisfy consumers. The majority of organic food producers are small, these retail systems are suitable for them and let consumers to buy organic products at the absence of the professional organic food retailing system.

For Belarus organic domestic market development, we need to inform both farmers and consumers about advantages and peculiarities of organic farming and their products. Farmers need help for certification (documentation preparation and costs of certification reimbursement), for good practices information and learning organic methods of production.

NGOs activists encourage Belarusian farmers to use organic farming methods and support their transition. First producers started certification process accordingly with EU legislation 4 years ago. In 2013, there were 8 farms in certification process (figure 1), and one of them, educational experimental farm of Belarusian State University, obtained the right to use EU organic farming logo. 4 farms finish transition period: «Luchenok Organic Farm» and «Vodoley» (12,3 ha & 9 ha; they are marked at the map in figure 1 as one point), «Malina» (5 ha) and «DAK» (60 ha). Totally, 100 ha in Belarus are certified accordingly EU organic farming legislation or are in transition period.

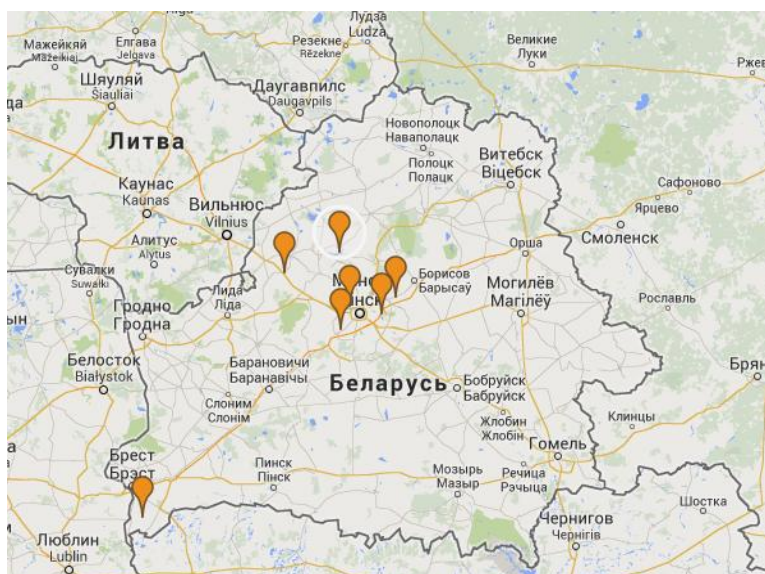


Figure 1. Farms in Belarus certified accordingly EU organic legislation (totally, about 100 ha).

All these farms suffer hardships due to the absence of national organic legislation. If it take more than one year to adopt a national organic law and introduce a system of financial support for organic farmers, will be difficult to keep the number of certified farms, not to mention an increase in their number.

Core messages and conclusions

Belarus needs support for development of organic agriculture from all interested parties. Key actions, which will help to break through barriers slowing down development of organic agriculture in Belarus:

- Elaboration of strategic action plan on development of organic agriculture in Belarus in cooperation with leading international institutions and independent consultants in this field.
- Creation of State Program of scientific researches on organic agriculture and adoption of results.
- Simplification of land renting for farmers, who plan to create an organic farm.
- Adopting the law for organic agriculture and other legal documents in the field of organic agriculture and harmonize them with EU legislation Tax benefits at organic farms.
- Introduction of new organic management system, including elimination of obligation to meet requirements and target figure that are obligatory for conventional farms.
- Creation of financial support system for organic farms.
- Development of organic market in Belarus.

- Development of national system of organic agriculture certification and national standards for organic products; introduction of certification and labelling system for organic products.
- Information campaign in mass-media aimed to promote organic methods of farming for producers and organic products for consumers.
- Education of professional in organic farming (agronomists, certification inspectors, etc.).

It is necessary to conduct wide awareness raising campaign to inform the potential customers about organic production and educate the agricultural producers. For the effective cooperation in development of organic agriculture in Belarus, it is necessary to combine efforts of all stakeholders.

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