

# Dr Helga Willer: «Our data are essential for policymakers»

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**Helga Willer** works at the **Organic Agriculture Research Institute – FiBL**, in the Department of Extension, Training & Communication. She is the Leader of the Group Project communication. She has been compiling and publishing key data on organic agriculture in «**The World of Organic Agriculture**» yearbook since 2000. Recent developments include interactive online databases and visual elements to make the data more accessible. The annual organic farming report covers areas of land under organic production, as well as land use, production, retail sales and international trade. More than 180 countries contribute to the report.



**The data collected by FiBL is a very important tool for the organic sector. Are you happy with the work done?**

Yes, we can say we are happy with the work done. With the data collection activities supported and backed by many partners from all over the world, we managed to bring transparency to the status of organic agriculture worldwide.

**In 2023 FiBL will celebrate its 50th anniversary. How has FiBL evolved in this journey? And how has changed your work since you started?**

FiBL Switzerland started in 1973 as a tiny institute and today has a team of almost 300 doing research in virtually all fields of organic agriculture. Recently the FiBL campus was enlarged, and the infrastructure improved to serve the research needs of the organic sector in Switzerland, Europe and worldwide even better. In addition, since the beginning of the 2000s, further FiBL institutes have emerged in Germany, Austria and France and a representation of all FiBL in Brussels (FiBL Europe). In addition, the Hungarian Institute of Organic Agriculture ÖMKi is part of the FiBL group. Since we started the data collection on organic agriculture worldwide, the funding situation for FiBL and thus also

for our data collection activities, which are part of FiBL's work programme for its leading funder FOAG (Federal Office for Agriculture), has greatly improved. In addition, in 2008, SECO, the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, started its support, and we were thus able to build a professional database and expand the data collection to more indicators. Furthermore, the support of the *Coop Sustainability Fund*, *IFOAM – Organics International*, *NürnbergMesse (BIOFACH)* is significant for us.

**«THERE IS A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COUNTRIES WITH ORGANIC LEGISLATION AND COUNTRIES WHICH DO NOT HAVE THIS»**

### **How do you collect data from all over the world?**

Most of the data collection is through personal contacts, even though, for some indicators, we collect the data from the internet. E.g., Eurostat, the European Union statistical office, provides its data (area, livestock, and operators) through its website, and we take it from there. However, many countries do not publish their data, and to these, we send our questionnaire (e.g. all in Latin American countries). We must note that there is a big difference between countries with organic legislation and countries which do not have this. In most countries, along with organic legislation, data collection is started because there is a solid basis. However, about half of the countries from which we collect the data do not have a law and no national data collection system in place. So we collect data from international certifiers for these countries, and we are very grateful that they provide their data.

For most countries, market and international trade data come from further sources. E.g. in the USA, organic area, production and livestock data are available from the *Notational Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS/USDA)*, whereas the retail sales data are provided by the private sector body *Organic Trade Association (OTA)*. International organic trade data come from the *Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS/USDA)*. In total, we tap at least 200 different data sources per survey.

### **What could be done better, and what tools would you need?**

A lot could be done better. One big challenge is the increasing number of available data (e.g. the recent availability of EU organic imports) and storing them in one single database. Data needs to be harmonised with our system, and even if automatic import into the database is possible, it still takes a lot of time to accommodate all data in the database and analyse them. Therefore, we need more human power to keep up with the increasing amount of available data from multiple sources. In addition, we need to get digital. Our key product is still the book *«The World of Organic Agriculture»* (print and online). We have also developed interactive databases and infographics on our website <https://statistcs.fibl.org>, but these need to be developed further (more indicators, better user-friendliness). In addition, our classification system of crops and livestock needs to be overhauled, and we need to be able to extract the data according to different classifications. Having our interactive tools available in several languages would also be good.



Furthermore, we need to develop better automatised production estimations (based on area data) as production data are often unavailable. This is, for instance, important to seize the significance of organic feed imports to the European Union. Also, our data could be used better for fraud detection, but this needs special effort.

**«HAVING OUR INTERACTIVE TOOLS AVAILABLE IN SEVERAL LANGUAGES WOULD ALSO BE GOOD»**

All these activities need extra funding. The current budget, which includes a sizeable FiBL part, only allows us to keep the essential collection going and publish the data annually but not develop the collection further.

And finally I also hope, that in future more countries will run their own and harmonised organic data collection system, which finally would reduce the workload of the FiBL and the hundreds of data collection volunteers worldwide.



123rf Limited@deyanarobova. Pea harvest

**How important is it to count on reliable data by territory, to act effectively in planning, drafting rules and laws, education and ultimately, for the global transition to organic farming?**

I think our data are essential for policymakers and donors as it helps them with decision-making and seeing the success of their activities. E.g., the European Commission uses our retail sales data to show that European organic consumers increasingly value organic products. In the Spanish Ministry's Agriculture annual report on the organic sector, the FiBL data are quoted multiple times to show the organic status in Spain in an international context.

And also scientists in the field of organic agriculture research mostly refer to our data in the introduction of their papers and theses and base on our data their hypothesis. Hence, it is really important that the data are reliable.



## **Sovereignty and food security are basic pillars. Are we moving forward or backwards? Are you optimistic about the future?**

Many things have changed with the war in Ukraine, and food security is at stake. The effects of inflation will possibly also affect the consumption of organic food. I am not very optimistic about agriculture's development in general.

*«OUR DATA HELPS POLICYMAKERS AND DONORS IT WITH DECISION-MAKING AND SEEING THE SUCCESS OF THEIR ACTIVITIES»*

But the good news is that organic systems that emphasize soil health help farmers increase resilience to the impacts of climate change. There is also extensive research demonstrating the potential of organic systems to reduce agriculture's contribution to climate change (i.e., mitigate climate change).

As to organic, we have to see. As organic is less input-dependent, it might have an advantage in the current situation. In addition, the *Farm-to-Fork* (F2F) strategy will positively affect the sector's development in the next couple of years.

**Author:** Oriol Urrutia, Co-Editor.

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