

Stakeholder involvement in policy evaluation and development in 11 European countries

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Abstract – In an effort in bringing together stakeholders of the organic farming and general agricultural policy sector within the EU in April May 2004 a group of stakeholders met for a one day-workshop in 11 European countries (AT, GB, DE, DK, IT, CH, CZ, PL, SI, EE, HU) to formulate policy recommendations for the development of the organic farming sector. Close personal contact of participants in these workshops facilitated policy learning and innovation at the national level and provided a platform to form alliances to decide on further actions. This contribution presents the synthesised results from all national workshops highlighting the current situation of organic farming policy in Europe and providing recommendations for future policy instruments¹.

INTRODUCTION

Organic Farming has become an inherent part of European agriculture in the EU as well as in many accession countries. Accordingly, agricultural policy has addressed organic farming in all EU countries and most Central and Eastern European countries (Häring et al. 2004a, Moschitz et al. 2004, Prazan et al. 2004). The conditions for the development of organic farming differ widely between EU and accession countries. This poses the question of how to develop a policy framework for organic farming that ensures a balanced and sustainable development of the organic farming sector. Furthermore, countries with little experience in organic farming policy design could profit from the knowledge and experience of countries with a longer experience with policy specifically addressing organic farming.

There is no single 'best way' of policy innovation for organic farming (Häring et al. 2004b). However, to innovate policies and to assess the transferability of "good practices" it is essential to understand the specific national environments behind these performances and policy practices. This requires a broad debate among stakeholders. Thus, in April 2004 a series of national workshops with a group of stakeholders was conducted in 11 European countries (AT, GB, DE, DK, IT, CH, CZ, PL, SI, EE,

HU) to assess the organic farming policy performance in each country and to develop novel policy instruments. The objective of this contribution is to present the synthesised results from all national workshops highlighting the current situation of organic farming policy in Europe and providing recommendations for future policy instruments.

METHODOLOGY

A structured form of participation of and consultation with policy stakeholders was developed to contribute to a scientifically based formulation of policy recommendations at the national and EU level (Häring et al. 2004b). Stakeholder involvement is achieved through two national and one EU level workshop which are managed as to facilitate policy learning among stakeholders of a country and across countries.

In April 2004 a series of workshops took place in 11 European countries to assess the effectiveness of different policy instruments in each country, and to develop suggestions for 'future' policy instruments and strategies to positively influence the development of the organic farming sector in the respective country (Häring et al. 2004). The workshop procedure was structured in 3 main phases:

1. Definition of SWOT: The analysis of organic farming policy was based on the methodological approach of SWOT analysis. On the one hand, participants analysed their country's specific policy instruments' strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, looking at the external environment of the organic farming sector, participants identified those areas that pose opportunities for organic farming in their own country, and those that pose threats or obstacles to its performance.

2. WOT rating: The objective was to compile an assessment of the importance and impact of the different weaknesses, and the attractiveness/seriousness and probability of the obtained opportunities and threats. In this way participants assessed weaknesses, opportunities and threats in order to determine which weaknesses are the most relevant in the organic farming policies of their country (high impact and high importance), which opportunities should be exploited for organic farming in their country (high attractiveness and high probability) and which are the threats from which the sectors needs to be aware of (high seriousness and high probability).

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3. Policy instruments identification: Participants were asked to elaborate possible policy instruments to address weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a brainstorming exercise. This led to a list of recommendations for national policy makers and provided the basis for the discussion of a EU policy frame-work for organic farming during an EU level workshop in February 2005 (Häring et al. 2004b).

RESULTS AND BRIEF DISCUSSION

The strengths of organic farming policy in the European Union were seen in the generally favourable political climate towards organic farming, an active dialogue of policy makers and institutions with organic interest groups, the prioritisation of marketing and consumers by policy, a GMO legislation protecting organic farming, a reliable organic inspection system and a diverse offer of support measures. However, a lacking coherence of policy was considered the most important weakness of organic farming policy. Specifically, participants consider that the communication with consumers is inappropriately supported and capacity building measures for the diverse challenges of organic farming are insufficient. Furthermore, research and development are too weakly supported and the certification system is considered too bureaucratic. The most important opportunities for the organic farming sector are seen in the current societal trends (health, environment, quality) which are creating demand, the reform of the European Common Agricultural Policy, a productive organic actors network and favourable natural conditions. The most severe threats to the organic farming sector are seen in GMO contamination, the competition on markets with producers of emerging countries and large food retailers due to EU accession and increasing globalisation coupled with a weak interest of consumers in organic food and their low willingness to pay organic price premia.

Results on policy instruments are only given for the example of the weakness "lacking coherence of policy". Results on other WOT can be found in Häring et al. (2004b). The current opinion is that lacking coherence of policy could be addressed by national Action Plans for organic farming. To develop an Action Plan a round table should be created which brings together a newly established organic farming committee at the ministry with organic stakeholders. The resulting Action Plans should be linked to Action Plans at the EU and regional level and should include quantitative targets in political programmes and concrete actions for their achievement. This could also include giving priority to organic farming in all Rural Development (investment, processing etc.) and Nature Protection Measures, assisted by an increased funding from non-agricultural sources. This could encourage the linkage of tourism, organic farming and regional development as one part of stimulating the creation of clusters of organic farming.

Part of an Organic Action Plan could be an improved communication with consumers by public information and promotion campaigns on organic

farming. Capacity building in organic farming could be improved by increasing the opportunities for education and training in organic farming, e.g. by the number organic advisors and by creating links and information exchange between stakeholders, e.g. by a common organic web portal.

An improvement of research and development by prioritising organic farming in national research funding or by introducing the option of integrated funding between different sectors was recommended. Furthermore, coherence of policy could be increased by a "green" tax reform, which could include a tax exemption on organic direct payments for organic farms, a reduced VAT for inputs and services to organic farming, as well as organic products or an a specific tax on pesticides, mineral fertilisers and nutrient output.

CONCLUSIONS

The described series of national workshops were a first step to policy learning, innovation and transfer for the organic farming sector in Europe. A wide range of organic farming actors were involved (Häring et al. 2004), a valuable assessment of organic farming policy was provided and a range of policy instruments for the long-term development of organic farming were developed. These have spread widely: Results have fed into and provided the base for a discussion at the EU level in a second workshop with EU level stakeholders and representatives from national workshop groups and a second series of national workshops.

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