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**The Evolution and Status of Organic
Principles in an International
Perspective**

OASE working paper

**Saki Ichihara Fomsgaard
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Preface

The present working paper is a part of the OASE project that has been carried out by a trans disciplinary research group primarily located at the Department of Economics, Politics and Public Administration, Aalborg University, Denmark. The focus of the project has been to conceptualise the evolution of organic agriculture and its relations to the social surroundings, hence the project title: Organic Agriculture in Social Entirety.

In the efforts to trace and analyse relations between principles and practices related to the organic way, we have not only focused on Denmark but have also tried to integrate international dimensions. As part of the international dimension, we asked two of our research assistants to investigate international interpretations of the organic principles at the IFOAM Congress in 2002. The results are published in the present paper along with a brief sketch of the historical background.

Pia Heike Johansen and Saki Ichihara Fomsgaard, both attached to the OASE research group, carried out the investigation. Saki Ichihara Fomsgaard has finished the present publication. Drafts have been discussed in the OASE research group, and a final draft has been reviewed by me.

Jan Holm Ingemann, Head of OASE

Introduction

The foremost research focus of the OASE project (Organic Agriculture in Social Entirety) is found in a growing gap between basic organic principles and the actual evolution of organic agricultural practices in Denmark. Yet at tackling upon this problematique we consider the influence of an international umbrella organisation, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM), is of clear importance. Among other aspects, it can be stressed that IFOAM's basic organic principles and basic standards have constituted crucial meaning as a "template" for the development of organic agriculture among the actors in this field. Such role of IFOAM as inspirational template was strong in Denmark particularly during the taking-off phase of organic agriculture in the 70s and 80s. As mentioned by several Danish pioneers in organic farming, they themselves and the leading Danish organisation for organic farming, LØJ (now ØL), have closely associated with the activities of IFOAM [Inge-mann 2002]. Furthermore, collaboration with IFOAM later bore fruits as the formation of IFOAM-EU working group in 1990 where the member organisations in this region worked collectively towards political negotiations with the EU institutions when they showed a dawning interest in organic farming.¹

It can be said that along with the emergence of diverse formal organic standards, the actual influence of IFOAM as organic "norm establisher and diffuser" may be currently at stake. Yet, we find that the evolving role of this federation as an established and widely acknowledged international forum for organic agriculture organisations still represents a general direction of how organic agriculture is understood and put into practice in different parts of the world today.

For this reason, two studies concerning IFOAM have been conducted as tentatively presented in the present publication: 1) a study of organisational history of IFOAM; and 2) a study of perception on organic principles and practices among non-Danish IFOAM members. The present paper begins with a pursuit of IFOAM history, and it will be followed by the second study on understanding of principles and practices by the IFOAM members.

¹ This working group was taken over by the IFOAM EU regional group constituted in 2000. While the working group was under the direct responsibility of the IFOAM World Board, this new structure is independent from the Board (IFOAM homepage. Checked 08.04.2006).

Section 1. An Overview of Organisational History

This first section attempts to draw an overview of IFOAM history since its birth in early 1970s to the time around the Congress in Victoria, Canada, in 2002. Main information sources for constructing this overview were own publications of IFOAM, such as *Annual Report*, back numbers of its magazine *Ecology and Farming*, and its memorial publication *25 years of IFOAM*, but also personal experiences of the members gained from the communication with them. While written documents provided us the general picture of this federation, such living information from the members gave more in-depth insights and dilemma experienced with the organisational development. The following demonstrates these aspects chronologically.

Forming the organisation (1970s)

IFOAM gave its first cry in Versailles, France, in 1972 with five founding member organisations; the Soil Association from Great Britain, the Biodynamic Association in Sweden, the Soil Association in South Africa, the Rodale Press in USA and Nature et Progrès in France. It appears that in this very early phase organic agriculture has been taken without a clear common definition by these founding members, whom affiliated to different organic conceptualisations of their own. Yet, an attempt of formulating a common framework for organic agriculture and the movement became evident in the late 70s particularly when the first IFOAM conference was held in Sissach, Switzerland, 1977. At this conference named *Towards a Sustainable Agriculture* the statue of the federation was made as follows.

“...[the aim of the IFOAM is to] ... provide an articulate, informed and coherent alternative to contemporary agricultural dogma...(and)...provide further impetus for both the research into, and the practice of, methods of husbandry which are based on the ethic of satisfying need and the obligation to do so by technologies that our planet can sustain” [cited in Woodward, 1998, p.32].

At the same time, eleven points to be the first IFOAM “Principles of Organic Agriculture” were agreed upon by the members at this conference, and these points are stated in the box below.

- “Principles of Organic Agriculture” resolved at the Sissach Conference, 1977
1. To work as much as possible within a closed system, and draw upon local resources.
 2. To maintain the long-term fertility of soils.
 3. To avoid all forms of pollution that may result from agricultural techniques.
 4. To produce foodstuffs of high nutritional quality and sufficient quantity.
 5. To reduce the use of fossil energy in agricultural practice to a minimum.
 6. To give livestock conditions of life that conform to their physiological needs and to humanitarian principles.
 7. To make it possible for agricultural producers to earn a living through their work and develop their potentialities as human beings.
 8. To use and develop appropriate technology based on an understanding of biological systems.
 9. To use decentralised systems for processing, distribution and marketing of products.
 10. To create a system which is aesthetically pleasing to both those within and those outside the system.
 11. To maintain and preserve wildlife and their habitats [in Woodward, 1998, p.34].

As recalled by the latter generation, the general conceptions shared by the members at that time were “radical” and stemmed from the “roots” of organic philosophy [Geier, 1998, p.14]. Similarly, Lawrence Woodward² claims that founding concepts of IFOAM was inspired by the works of organic pioneers in Europe, such as Rudolf Steiner in Germany, Hans Müller and Hans Peter Rusch in Switzerland and Albert Howard in England, and J.I. Rodale in the USA, but more directly by Eva Balfour, a disciple of Howard, who involved in the development of the federation in its early days. From the point of Woodward, the core conception of Balfour resided in the indivisible relationship between food and health, and based on this, it was understood that the role of organic agriculture was ought to go “beyond the farmgate,” i.e. from the soil to “*the table and encompassed storage, distribution, preparation, and consumption and any processing in between*” [Woodward, 1998, p.33]. He further asserts that such conception emphasised “*social, economic, and environmental parameters*” which transcend the issue of food, and thus, original organic principles prioritised a locally-based, decentralised, and closed food system over international trade, the use of renewable energy over fossil energy, the avoidance of all forms of pollution or a humanitarian principle on livestock [Woodward, *ibid.*, p.34].

Overall, it is likely that during this founding phase in the 70s main foundation of the IFOAM, such as the membership, the headquarters, which was in fact just a poorly equipped borrowed space of one French member organisation, and crucially the formulation of the basic principles, has been created under the initiative of European and American members. Founding organic principles were, then, envisaged on the basis of a broad understanding of pioneers’ works with adding nuances of protest against the conventional agri-industrial system. In this phase, the organisational basis of the IFOAM was still preliminary without full-time secretary, but it was carried on by the dedication of several individuals and active member organisations [Geier, 1998, p.15]. IFOAM has, though, gone a step forward in the late 70s by gradually establishing a structure that aimed at functioning as general secretariat, albeit these were still run by voluntary basis. Meanwhile, the member organisations had grown to 50 from 17 nations in 1975.

Yet concerning the broad consensus in this founding phase, there may be a space for discussion about whether there was sufficient dialogue between them. One simple but non-ignorable problem could be the language. Many member organisations from non-English speaking countries had substantial language problems and thus it was difficult for them to understand the context of internal letters and negotiate their position effectively [Bourgeois, 1998, p.14: Murayama, interview, 27August, 2002]. Besides the language problem, the predominance of early member organisations from West Europe and the USA could also be seen in their over-representation in (*de facto*) executive and secretary positions. Considering these aspects, it can be safe to say that certain members from the West inclined to have more influence for organisational decision-making than those from other regions. Evidence can be found, for example, in the attitude towards building organic standards. While for some organisations standards and rules were not considered as important³ and thus these aspects were not well

² Lawrence Woodward had been the Chairman of the Board from 1982 to 1984 and the Vice-Chairman from 1984-1986 in the IFOAM.

³ Standards were not emphasised in some regions. For instance, in the case of Japan the major organic agriculture organisation has for a long time eschewed the establishment of standards by claiming organic agriculture, which was based on face to face relationship between farmers and consumers, did not necessitate standards. Furthermore, it was also due to the different climate conditions over the nation, which fundamentally imposed technical difficulties for some regions than others, that refrained the organisation from building standards.

developed by them, several organisations in France and the Soil Association in Great Britain had worked on this issue already in the early 70s for the purpose of giving a guidance to newcomers [JOAA, 1999, p.64-65]. IFOAM started developing its Basic Standards since the late 70s, and naturally these European organisations played an initiative and thus crucial role at establishing the Standards.

Expansion phase (1980s)

A significant turning point of the federation could be found in the mid-1980s, when the process of professionalisation were put into force after having gone through a serious financial crisis. According to Bernward Geier⁴, IFOAM could sustain, since a Swedish member, Gunner Videgard of Naturastiftelsen, agreed on serving as General Secretary and to be in charge of financial management in the period of 1982-1987 without payment. Consequently, in 1986 the federation was for the first time equipped with a new headquarters in Tholey-Theley in Germany with own office space and professional secretariat. At the same time, the membership increased swiftly up to around 500 members and associates in 75 countries in the late 1980s (in contrast to only 80 members from 30 countries in the late 1970s) [Geier, 1998, p.16]. Along with this stabilisation of the internal structure and the organisational growth, the activities of the federation extended to political lobbying advocating the settlement of organic regulations in the European Community, publication of a magazine, establishment of a documentation archive etc. The field of action was soon after widened to the level of not only the international civil society organisations, such as Greenpeace and WWF, but also crucially formal international organisations, such as the United Nations (including FAO, WHO and UNCTAD), World Bank, and WTO [Geier, 1998, p.18]. Meanwhile, more resources were put on developing the IFOAM Basic Standards for the purpose of being a foresighted basis for others to formulate contextual relevant organic standards, and to build own, internationally recognised structures for organic accreditation (later International Organic Accreditation Service (IOAS)).

Examining the organisational development in the 80s, it seems that there was still a clear overrepresentation of members from the West, who determined the clear strategic orientation of IFOAM towards professionalisation, political representation, organisation of research projects and inclusion of non-organic actors Yet this time, such a decision was more likely derived from the substantial success of this region in advancing organic agriculture to become a part of the national or even supra-national policy agenda concerning agriculture, foods, and sustainability. Taking for example, the American Ministry of Agriculture published a report recommending organic agriculture already in 1980, though it was much later that the American government carried out an actual action on it. In Europe, environmental protection was gaining remarkable attention at the political agenda and the environmental movements were remarkably institutionalised as seen in the development of professional lobby organisations for environmental interest, and the electoral outcomes of green parties in several countries. Integration of environmental issues into the general policy framework turned out to be evident in European countries, where some national governments started to employ environmental indicators into the national policies already in the mid to late-80s, as seen, for instance, in the development of the precautionary principle by the German government [Mckinney and Hill, 2000]. Within a course of such development, institutionalisation of organic agriculture on the European level was set into motion, when the EU started discussions on this issue as a part of

⁴ Bernward Geier has been the executive director of the IFOAM since 1987 and served other executive positions until his resignation from IFOAM in 2005.

the Common Agricultural Policy reform in the late 80s. Generally, IFOAM in many ways followed such trends of environmental organisations in Europe, which took pragmatic and moderate approach to the established political institutions and industry at large.

Behind this organisational growth, some controversial changes, for those who took more purist position to the basic principles of organic farming, were made. Some significant points could be the widening of the membership, which originally allowed only non-profit making organisations, to organic business actors such as organic traders and processors, on the one hand⁵, and the involvement of the federation in the international trade interests represented by the interaction with well established organisations like WTO, on the other. This point is illustrated by Woodward in showing that the direction of the federation has more or less been geared towards growth of “organic industry” ever since, which resulted in general tolerance for conventionalisation of organic agriculture and its position in the agri-industrial complex. Furthermore, he claims that national and regional governments have adopted only achievable parts of organic practices, such as certification of the raw materials, and more difficult issues, such as self-limitation on production scale, energy use and consideration over all food chain, has been significantly excluded from concern [Woodward, 1998, p.34-35].

Diversification (1990s onwards)

In the early 1990s the IFOAM has stimulated its position as an international federation tending the interest of organic agriculture by starting the first serious dialogue with the UN-organisation FAO at the Rio Conference held in 1992, which later bore fruits as entitling the highest observer and liaison status at the United Nations in the follow-up of the Conference in 1993 [Geier, 1998, p.20]. This signified the position of the IFOAM as the representative for the organic farming movement in the formal international arena. In the meantime, as the number and hence weight of members from the southern hemisphere increased, the scope of the federation has extended to more international scale and the problems of have-nots, such as food security, starvation, desertification, and the economic dependency of the South to the North. In response, the federation established a “new model” pronounced in the Sao Paulo Declaration in 1992. The declaration was titled *Organic Agriculture, a Key to a Sound Development and a Sustainable Environment*, and it reflected an evolving concept of environmental discourse that linked *social justice* and *environmental protection* as global concerns. Such objectives stressed the right of farmers to land and sustainable use of natural resources, the recognition and respect of indigenous peoples’ knowledge, to eradicate the causes of hunger and misery in the third world, to guarantee food autonomy to all nations and to promote a base for fair trade between food producers and consumers worldwide.

Yet crucially, the emerging issue of social justice had to face a conflict with the founding principles of organic agriculture. That is to say, the Southern countries, which were advocating assessment of social justice into the organic principles, were generally dependent on the conventional global economy, i.e. exports to the developed world, and hence generally to claim social justice and fair trade *within* present global free markets. Consequently, a mere adaptation of social justice measures into the free trade system could (and can) ironically jeopardize local food self-sufficiency, local rural community, and the survival of organic farmers in the food importing countries, on the one hand, and also imply the opposite effect to the idea of a minimum use of non-renewable energy, since the trade with the southern countries, even

⁵ However, during the 1980s profit making organisations were not allowed to vote at the General Assembly.

tries, even within a fair trade scheme, will often be based on long-distance trade. Such conflicts were illustrated in the IFOAM magazine *Ecology and Farming* as follows:

“Although worries about transport costs and environmental issues abound, it is generally accepted that food can and should move across the world bringing to a region what can not be grown there. But what about the food that is only out-of-season but is imported in from countries across the world, essentially eliminating the concept of seasonality? And then what about the foods that are imported into a country, even when it is the height of the local season, and sold cheaper than the local food? Can either of these situations be justified, especially in the organic movement when environmental and social issues in conflict with these practices are of importance to its holistic beliefs?” [Vol. 26, 2001, p.8]

Similar arguments were observed in the discussions on stimulating the IFOAM’s accreditation programme for the countries without sufficient national organic regulation. As an IFOAM member said;

“About trade, there is one thing I have to say. In fair trade, they are always talking about where the product comes from. Giving a fair price (in order) to give producers good education and so on. It is interesting, but we have not delivered the work on where we sell. For me each time we sell product in other regions, we have to know in advance if the product exists in the region. If you export organic product to other regions where the product exists, you will kill the farmers there. I do not think everything could be put in the rules. I think what is happening now is often taking the same mistake as conventional agriculture.” [Helvé La Prairie⁶. interviewed 26 August, 2002]

Such claim of the IFOAM members seems to associate with the current situation of “*organic dilemma*” [Woodward, 1998, p.37] referring to the increasing compromise of original organic concepts with quantitative growth. Woodward depicts it is possible to observe a growing notion among members claiming that “*the organic movement will have succeeded when an organic Mars Bar is on sale,*” but, he asserts, it is not “*where we started from*” [ibid. 1998, p.33]. Concern for eroding the original spirit of the federation became also evident at the General Assembly at Sao Paulo in 1992, when the issue of giving voting rights to business affiliates was heatedly debated. This proposal of the Board was rejected at the Assembly, and resolved eventually after the long discussion until 2 o’clock in the morning on the agreement of allowing them to collectively cast one vote with three written endorsements [Geier, 1998, p.19]. These aspects can well indicate that, along with the increase in membership from not only different parts of the world but also “outside” the organic agricultural movement community, the federation has been ever more struggling with finding a common direction.

Yet, while the central orientation of the IFOAM continued to aim at mainstreaming of organic agriculture and itself within the neo-liberal order, the members who envisaged alternatives to the conventional agri-industrial system began to create a network in the latter half of the 90s, and this appears to have resulted in the creation of a counter-stream in the IFOAM. Some of the core concepts uniting those members has been the creation of *local* (in regard to global, free-trade) food systems characterised as the attempt of Community Supported Agriculture

⁶ Helvé La Prairie was the President of the IFOAM during the period of 1994-1998.

(CSA), on the one hand, and the pursuit of *economic and social self-reliance* of farmers and small food producers, on the other. The former was mainly founded in so-called advanced industrial countries, such as the USA and Japan, while the latter has strongly been advocated by the Latin American members. This can signify different foundations in problematising the general trend of the IFOAM. In general, the CSA group put significant emphasis on a new value of life, which is distinct from the pursuit of material wealth, while the Latin American group were more likely to express predicament of agricultural workers as “weak” in the world system and the actual economic hurdle for them to convert to organic. Yet, it appears that such differences between these two groups is recently narrowing down, as the CSA group began to express an alternative way to tackle upon social injustice in Africa and Latin America to the “green” business [Henderson, 2004, p.32-33]. What is more, it can be said that the frustration of both groups pointed at the excessive role of the Standards today. In reality, the Standards have become highly technical, and drafts drawn by the Standards Committee, which is made of organic agriculturalists with natural science background, have difficulty in including such elements as “*respect of traditional peoples’ knowledge*” as asserted by the Sao Paulo Declaration. Furthermore, while the common objectives of IFOAM, which were agreed by the constituency at each General Assembly, would be enclosed as *the Principle objectives of organic farming* in the beginning of the Standards, they, in practice, do not restrict the context of the Standards. In fact the Standards have apparently left “challenging” items of the Principle Objectives, such as the minimum use of non-renewable energy, the diversity of crops in a farm, and the concern on condition of a food import country, out from compulsory requirements but as “recommended” efforts [IFOAM Basic Standards, 2002].

Such dilemmas of IFOAM came out to be visible at the Congress in Victoria, Canada, in 2002, whose core theme *Cultivating the Community* punctuated a resurgent focus on local aspects, which could be seen in some contrast to the message of “expansion” pronounced in the former Congress in Basel in 2000 with the title of *The World grows organic*. The Congress program in Victoria highlighted the issue of alternative ways of marketing such as farm gate sales, weekly farmers’ markets, box and delivery schemes and retails at small organic shops. Furthermore, the first day of General Assembly for the first time offered a discussion session for different prime themes, and one of them was entitled “Beyond standards”. In this session, the initiators stated in a clearly critical tone that “*we stand opposed to the present order dominated by corporations, industrial agriculture standardisation*” and instead called for “*pro-human scale for a site-specific agriculture- biologically and socially diverse with local market and appropriate long distance trade.*” Such perspective was summarised in a continuous action to “*transform the food system into a system based on closed cycles, proximity and equitable subsidiarity with democratic controls*” [Internal material delivered at the General Assembly, 26 August 2002]. What is more, at this General Assembly a new sentence referring to encourage the local/regional production and distribution was added in *the Principle objectives*. Yet, it can be safe to say that these attempts of the counter-stream have not yet given enough impact to affect the substantial part of organisational routine, as the majority of the Board and secretariat seem likely to agree on pursuing the mainstreaming strategy. Such aspect can be reflected in the statement of then president as stated below;

“...within the (organic) ‘sector’ it is important that the ‘movement’ is playing a leading role. I do not think it is productive to try to work out any clear distinction between the sector and the movement, and in many cases persons and organizations have double roles. The same farmer that sells her organic products in the open market for the highest possible price and thereby supplies mainly wealthy people often living far away, may very well have another vision of how she really

wants things to be, such as a living farm closely involved with a similarly vibrant local community”. [Gunner Rundgren,⁷ IFOAM, 2001]

Discussion

This overview of the IFOAM history demonstrated certain change in the common understandings of organic agriculture in this international umbrella organisation. While in the early phase basic organic principles were formulated on the basis of the critique of agri-industrial system, the narratives employed since its expansion phase in the 80s have increasingly shed off such critical tone. Meanwhile, the federation has grown with a clear orientation towards professionalisation, political representation (political lobby), and service, which can be represented by the management of projects and the facilitation of own organic standard and accreditation system. This organisational trajectory was pushed forward under the continuing initiative of the West, who has generally occupied the most seats of the executive and secretariat positions. It can be said that such organisational trajectory reflected the general trend of environmental organisations in the 80s particularly in Europe, which showed apparent tendency to take a pragmatic, reformist strategy, in contrast to the 70s’ trend of new social movements, which characteristically envisaged more radical and to a certain degree utopian visions of society. Around that time, the goal orientation of IFOAM turned out to prioritise the diffusion and integration of organic agriculture into the general policy framework over an immediate transformation of conventional agri-industrial system.

Nevertheless, the current discrepancy between the members at pushing such expansionist strategy or seeking for alternatives could signal a new juncture of this federation. It indicates increasing multiplicity in interests as result of the inclusion of new members from non-Western countries but also from business societies as seen in the figure 1 stated below. Significantly, the participation of these new actors as its constituency made a continuance of the original principles difficult. Particularly by the members from the South it has often been asserted that food security, economic security for farmers and social justice, rather than achievement of truly environmentally friendly farming dismissing long-distant trade, should be taken as urgent tasks. For the profit-making actors what matters most is the assurance of added-value of organic goods in the international market. Hence their focus on the Standards and the accreditation programme is strong, but they are not likely to agree on including items which are not convertible to the conventional system of trade. What is more, this demographic change in the constituency led the IFOAM to widen its scope from farming oriented focus to social agenda represented by social justice, fair trade, and protection of indigenous knowledge. Such development was reflected in the theme of congress, which generally intended to capture a hot topic of the time. This aspect is illustrated in the figure 2 below.

Reconciliation of the basic organic principles with these new interests from the South and corporate associates has so far resulted in the compromise of the former with the acceptance of the new-liberal order. On the other hand, the dilemma, which IFOAM is facing today, appears to suggest the capacity of this federation to function as an international forum for the organic sector. It can be safe to say that the federation is still overrepresented by the interests of the West. However, the strength of the West, in particular Europe, has stemmed largely from its common interest in the political lobby for the EU, while the members in other regions have had difficulty in finding such mutual interest to collaborate with each other. In addition, the aspect of limited resources of many member organisations to work on international issues,

⁷ Gunner Rundgren was then president of the IFOAM.

while their major field of activity is still domestic, is also an apparent reason that hinders collaboration. These can, however, hint that the power dimension or the organisational orientation of the IFOAM may change by time along with the member organisations with a counter vision develop their capacity for collective action, as long as the decision-making of the federation continues to be based on the democratic vote of its constituency.

Figure1. Increase in diversity of the IFOAM participants

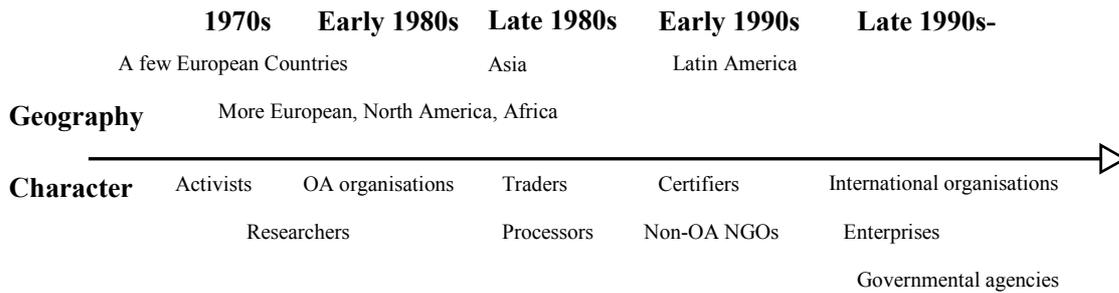
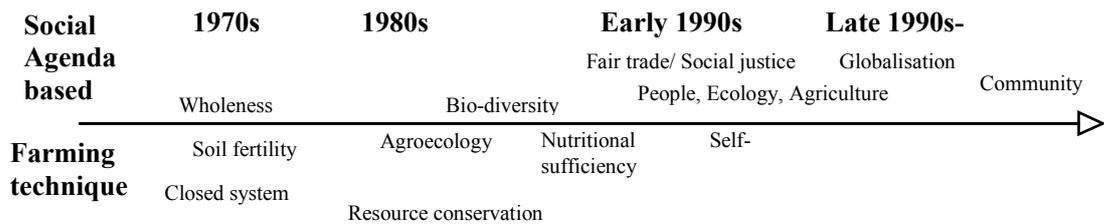


Figure2. Key themes of the IFOAM Congress (formerly called scientific conferences)



OA= organic agricultue

Section 2. Perceptions of IFOAM members on Basic Organic Principles

This second section aims to illustrate the result of interviews⁸ with several IFOAM members at the 13th IFOAM World Congress and General Assembly in Victoria, Canada, during the period of 22 to 28 August 2002. The major aim of these interviews was to investigate how basic organic principles are understood by non-Danish members of IFOAM. Based on this objective, we targeted the persons serving for the major posts of the federation, i.e. *the World Board, executive director, the Standard Committee*,⁹ and its umbrella organisation, *International Organic Accreditation Service (IOAS)*, but also the delegates of *active member organisations*.¹⁰ The World Board is elected at each General Assembly and it is the board members who are responsible for making the agenda of the Assembly. Before the new election at Assembly in Victoria, the Board was composed of 10 persons, with 3 Europeans (Sweden, Germany, and Italy), 2 from the USA, 2 from Asia (Japan and India), and one each from Latin America (Argentina), Africa (Senegal), and Australia. On the other hand, the executive director is in charge of every-day function of the federation and headquarters in Germany. And as already mentioned shortly in the former section, the Standard Committee is responsible for drawing draft for the IFOAM Basic Standards, and it was, at that time, made of 15 organic agriculturalists (11 members with natural science background, 3 associate members, and 1 coordinator). The Committee consisted of 6 from Europe (2 from Germany, 1 Sweden, 1 Italy, 1 Poland, and 1 Switzerland), 3 from Oceania (2 from Australia, 1 New Zealand), 2 from the USA, 2 from Latin America (1 from Argentina, 1 Mexico), 1 from Kenya, and 1 from China. Together with the IOAS, we considered perceptions of those in charge of organic standards were of increasing importance, since it is the standards which systematically and most extensively restrict actual practices of organic agriculture today.

Interviews were semi-structured with four questions and each interview, which lasted shorter than one hour, was recorded. Basic information of interviewees and questions can be found in the box below.

Basic information of the interviewees

- 19 interviewees in total (see table in Appendix).
- 8 interviewees are elected members of the World Board (5 were then members and 3 were former members), 1 is then executive director, and 6 are the members of the Standards Committee. 2 are affiliated to IOAS.
- 2 interviewees are active IFOAM members, who have the right to vote at the General Assembly.
- 9 interviewees are from the European countries (Sweden, Germany, the UK, France, and Italy).
- 1 from Africa (Senegal).
- 5 from Asia (Japan, China, Malaysia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka).
- 2 from USA.
- 2 from South America (Argentina)

Questions

1. Would you please introduce yourself and your relations to organic farming?
2. What are the three most important principles for organic farming that differentiate organic farming from conventional farming for you? And why are they most important?
3. Do you think the principles live up to practice?
4. Do you think the principles have developed or changed over time?

⁸ The author thanks to Pia Heike Johansen, who contributed to this section as a part of interview team.

⁹ Request was sent to all then-members of these posts. We did interview with those who accepted the request.

¹⁰ Soil Association was selected owing to its long-lasting involvement with and its central role in the IFOAM. A delegate of AIAB, Italy, was chosen due to the recommendation by a Standards Committee member, Christina Micheloni, who herself could not attend the Congress. On the other hand, a delegate of Earth Net Foundation, Thailand, was interviewed by observing his active utterances during the General Assembly.

Answers to the questions

Question 1: Would you please introduce yourself and your relations to organic farming?

All of them had major profession/carrier in the organic farming related area, and most of them have been working in this field for more than ten years. Nearly all of them have been organic farmers by themselves, however, many from the developed part of the world no longer practiced farming for making own living. Most of them started in organic farming as a reaction to conventional farming, and the problems of pesticides were often mentioned as their starting point. Yet, in more detail, some reacted on the visible pollution such as dead fish in the well or by the wide-spread concern on resource scarcity triggered by the oil crisis, and one person was inspired by a classmate at the agricultural university, who started cultivating organic in own garden. Many interviewees from Europe started working on organic farming in 70s, which is relatively earlier than those from other regions.

Except one interviewee working for the governmental agency and two full-time employees of IFOAM/IOAS, all other interviewees were affiliated to private, non-governmental, and mostly non-profit making organisation for organic farming in ones country. While the organisations of the interviewees from so-called developing countries tended to work directly with (often small-scale) farmers within their locality, those from the developed countries mostly exercised nation-wide, or sometimes internationally, and their activities were extended to wider functions, such as certification, consultancy for conversion to organics, accreditation programs, research, education, political lobby etc.

Question 2: What are the three most important principles for organic farming that differentiate organic farming from conventional farming for you? And why are they the most important?

As seen in the table in the Appendix, there was a big diversity in the answers to the question. However, we suggest that the results can be roughly categorised into three groups: its orientation toward *farming method*, *society/human-centred focus*, or *non-human focus*.

The first group mainly pointed to the principles concerning how organic farming is defined as a unique and distinct farming method from the conventional method, and hence its primal focus resides in the activities of farmyard. Nearly all interviewees gave at least one principle regarding this point. The claim raised most frequently in this context can be labelled as the principle of ecology, as its basic argumentation was that organic farming should be organised on the basis of the self-sustaining system of nature, and the role of humans is to support or collaborate but not to disturb such system. Despite different expressions - some were more poetic, this concept on nature's system or eco-system was evidently claimed as the foundation for the practice of organic farming. The importance of this principle was explained differently. Some stressed the aspect of environmental protection in general, but some emphasised more precisely the positive effect of following this principle in the farmyard. The latter explanation inclined to state the validity and advantage of working within the nature's cycle in pest control and thus in reducing the use of chemicals. In general, the interviewees illustrated eco-system as a system people can learn by experience and tradition.

More ramified points in this group are itemised below.

- Some interviewees put more focus on the condition of "soil." This emphasis on soil fertility was likely to reflect a European and American tradition, when no one from other regions touched upon this particular focus. It was explained important mainly because

soil is a fundament for the health of plants, and the focus on soil makes the practices of the farmer different from conventional farming.

- The explanation for the principles of “closed system,” “holistic approach,” “recycling,” and “the use of renewable energy” were all closely linked and often overlapped. As regard these principles, the interviewees tended to commonly touch upon the recycling of nutrients and energy within the farm through a minimum disruption of nature’s cycle and, according to some, composting. The aspects referred to these principles were similar to the principle of ecology, but different in terms of their extended scope beyond the farm gate. The interviewees who posed these principles inclined to state the significance of putting processing and distribution in a part of the closed cycle. One person claimed truly nutritious food fundamentally requires a production system within internal cycles, since good energy and nutrition can be returned to the farm in this way. And this is the aspect which cannot be achieved by the conventional “liner” system.
- As similar to the principle of ecology, three people who raised the principle of “(bio-) diversity” referred to the pest control enabled by conserving diversity on the farm. One person added to this point that it also concerned with the protection of the seeds, which represent own farm and culture. He pointed this in relation to the fear of GMOs can harm the value of local-specific food culture.
- There were only two people raised “no use of agro-chemicals” as one of the three most important principles. Those two who pointed to the non-use of chemicals were both members of the Standards Committee.
- The principle of “sustainability” was raised by two interviewees. And both of them appointed it as an important principle for farming practice but also for surrounding environment and coming generations. For this reason, this principle was also classified in the two other groups with human and non-human centred focus. In relation to the farming method, the principle of sustainability appears to overlap with the principle of ecology but have a wider vision than farmyard, since it was mentioned as an effort to sustain the balance between farming and the surrounding environment such as climate conditions.
- The principle of “conservation of nature” was put into this group of farming method, since the two interviewees explained this principle as necessary condition for organic farming. Those two, who raised this principle, were from the tropical regions, and it seems that, for this climatic reason, they explained conserving the nature as it is already can give sufficient nutritious food.

On the other hand, characteristics of the *second group* can be summarised in a social-human centred focus, which more clearly involved with the issues of society at large. The principles categorised in this group could be divided into two sub-groups: the group with a *socio-political orientation* and the other group with a *collective goods orientation*. The principles categorised in this first sub-group had tendency to stress unequal opportunity or conditions for farmers/producers in the present agri-food system and trade, by saying roughly, who are either in the Third World or not competitive enough due to their small/medium size of the farm. They also showed resemblance with what the IFOAM often terms as “social agenda” represented by social justice and fair trade. As this social agenda is strongly pushed forward by the members of the developing countries, all the interviewees from so-called Third World stated at least one principle of this sub-group. Although the words differed, the common message expressed by those interviewees appears to be that a farmer can establish a self-dependent farm which is free from external input, and in order to achieve this, a benign international trade system based on fair trade should be necessary. Here, three interviewees from the developing countries expressed that there is no market for organics at home, and hence, farmers in

their countries have to seek for export. And one of them clearly stated that it is not realistic for their farmers to organise a system for local consumption. On the other hand, there were also several interviewees from the West, who raised the similar principle, which emphasised the empowerment of farmers or people. Most of them in this region did not directly link the issue with the Third World, but they similarly stressed the independency of organic farmers to take own decision on farm management as well as (securing) economic well-being of these farmers. One interviewee in this region said the focus on social issues is relatively new in the organic farming community, but a simple introduction of fair trade is not a solution, since it will just result in the global competition between organic farmers as the logic of conventional trade system goes. Overall, the principles in this sub-group with socio-political orientation inclined to signify the basic needs of, mostly, organic farmers to practice organic farming in an economically and socially sustainable way. The characteristic argumentation in these principles was that the well-being of organic farmers and that of the society come together. The establishment of fair trade network is based on a long-term relationship between humans to humans, and it was perceived that it reflects the humanisation of the society.

In contrast, the other sub-group of the socio-politically oriented principle inclined to have more tendencies to stress the aspect of common goods, or in other words, the instrumental value of the principle for the individuals and society as a whole. It was categorised in this way because such principle as the production of healthy food or the achievement of food quality was mostly appointed for the sake of the health of the people. However, it must be noted that the interviewees from the West referred this principle of food and health to the well-spread concept of organic farming pioneers, as advocated by Eva Balfour, and for those people to produce good quality food was naturally connected to the change in the whole process of the food system. Similarly, the principle of conservation of rural community was explained for its benefit to cleaner water. However, it must be noted that a few stated that the principle of healthy food was attached to the very conception of the pioneers of the organic farming movement, since it represented a significant shift in the value of the post-war period from quantity to quality. And one person asserted that this principle can encompass “all the aspects (such as) ecological, social aspects of organic farming,” which go beyond the technical factors which many politicians and bureaucrats are currently interested in

The last group was labelled with regard to its focus on the ethic of non-human, as represented by animal welfare, and to a lesser degree, sustainability. Three interviewees proposed animal ethics as one of the three most important principles, and all of them were from the West. The reasoning for this principle was not very clear. One person said it was because “*it is beyond all ethical approach,*” and the other answered “*it is simply personal, I can relate myself more to the animals than plants.*” However, several more, also from the West, touched upon the issue of animal welfare either as most evolving or underdeveloped area for organic farming.

To sum up, the answers to the question 2 (What are the three most important principles for organic farming that differentiate organic farming from conventional farming for you? And why are they the most important?) were classified firstly into the three groups in accordance with its orientation toward a farming method, a society-human centred focus, and a non-human centred focus. All the interviewees appointed at least one principle about the farming method, and among all the principle of ecology was apparently the most supported. Society-human centred principles showed two distinct approaches: one with socio-political agenda, such as social justice and empowerment of the farmers, and the other with an orientation to instrumental value of organic farming as common goods, represented by the focus on healthy food. On the other hand, the principle around non-human centred focus was clearly an orientation of the people in the West.

Result of the question 2 1¹¹

<i>Farming method</i>	<i>Social, Human-centred focus</i>	<i>Non-human centred focus</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecology/Working with Nature • Focus on soil • Closed system/Holistic approach • Bio diversity. • No use of chemicals • Use of renewable energy/recycling • Sustainability • Nature conservation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-dependency of farmers/empowerment of people • Healthy food/ food quality • Social justice/fair trade • Conservation of rural environment • Sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animal welfare • Sustainability

Question 3: Do you think the principles live up to practice?

Among 19 interviewees, there were only 4 who clearly answered “no” to this question, while 7 answered more or less “yes.” 5 answered practices are approaching to the level of the principles but not yet reached what they are supposed to be, and we did not get answers from 3 interviewees. Yet, as one interviewee, who answered the principles did not live up to practice, said “*that is why we need principles,*” quite a few mentioned that the principles are not something we can achieve easily, and it is natural that the principles have not lived up to practice. The other type of answering “no” to this question referred to the physical, geo-climatic hurdles to put the principles into practice. One interviewee mentioned about the tropical climate of his region that hinders the total elimination of chemicals. The other, on the other hand, talked about the difficulty of large farms to totally eliminate (chemical) inputs.

Among the interviewees answered “yes” or “not yet” there was certain tendency to touch upon the changing environment of organics along with the increasing market opportunities. And about this issue, the opinions were divided. One interviewee with a pragmatic voice claimed that market-based development can change consumers over time, and hence “*the door should be open to all organics.*” He asserts that a bigger problem is putting farmers into the economic struggle. By contrast, a person from the USA said while she has seen real transformation in the right direction, the moving of organic products into the conventional distribution systems is a controversial area from the point of view of the founders of the movement, who envisaged a total change of the production systems. And from her point of view, the development so far has not been so successful in changing the “infrastructure” of conventional systems, but come so far in changing the production systems.

Some answered that the achievement of the principles can be nation specific and/or context dependent. One person said the realisation of the principles into actual practices became easier in the EU countries due to the subsidy on organic agriculture. However, according to him, this has not necessarily led to a development in his country, Italy, since many farmers converted to organic just to get subsidies, and as a result only 40 per cent of the farm produce goes to the market.

¹¹ They were listed from the top in accordance with popularity.

On the other hand, one interviewee from Sri Lanka asserted that principles were made to put into practices, and organic farming cannot be exercised ignoring the principles. This conception of principles was clearly different from many others, who somewhat understood principles as difficult and complicated goals.

Overall, it can be safe to say that the majority was not pessimistic about the development of the principles, though many acknowledged continuing efforts to be necessary.

Question 4: Do you think the principles have developed or changed over time?

The answer to this question was divided into half and half. We got 8 “yes” and “no,” and 3 unclear answers. One member of Standards Committee said the principles have been remaining the same since he started working for organic farming in early 80s. Others, who answered the principles have not been changed, signalled that it was not the principles but the expressions or operationalisation that have been changed. One interviewee mentioned “*we maybe employed little bit more poetic terms in the past for the social aspects, but now principles are more precise....like fair trade or child labour and so on*”. The other claimed that the fight against pesticides and GMOs stems from the same organic principle, and thus, while how to apply the principles to the actual issues may have changed, the principles themselves have not.

On the other hand, some interviewees answered that the principles have been changed along with the development of the movement. What was most evidently claimed was the increase in knowledge. In this line of argument, it was asserted that as more farmers adopted organic practices, our understanding increased as a result of activities being examined and re-examined. One person argued from this point of view that such principle as ecological principle has become much better articulated today than before, and hence, people should be “*willing to change*.” In the similar vein, another person, who is the member of Standard Committee, asserted that with increase in knowledge it became more effective to practice organic farming also in big-scale farms, while it used to be more like trial and error before. Another member of the Committee referred also to the advantage of bigger scale farming today by saying “*I think organics have been so much small scale...but when you grow in scale you can also handle some of the situations easier*”. Hence, according to this person, organic principles have been meeting conflicts as a big step was taken. And “*step-by-step*” is a necessary concept for the development of organic principles.

Furthermore, one interviewee mentioned about “*why*” the principles were changed. He claimed that “*there was a period when a bunch of people who had worked on the original standards backed off*” as result of strategic change of IFOAM towards very inclusive to new actors, who “*could not sign up to the principles as they were*”.

To sum up, there was an apparent divide at understanding the principles as changeable or not. Among those, who were against the idea of the principles having been changed, some strongly claimed the principles were unchangeable, while some remarked that the way they were expressed have been changed but not the core of the principles themselves. On the other hand, the interviewees, who answered the principles have been changed, typically asserted that the increase in knowledge about the eco-system has opened up new possibilities and better efficiency for organic farming, while many things, such as big-scale farming, were technically difficult before. Hence, they tended to be suspicious about sticking to the original principles, which inclined to prefer small-scale farming.

Discussion

The examination of these interview results required some degree of generalisation, when many answers inclined to encompass several different elements and expressed with some emotional components. Some appeared to get used to be asked about the organic principles and hence, formulated three principles clearly, some did not. Yet, when they were asked why these specific principles were important, their orientation became rather clearer. Many of them envisioned different role of each principle, and thus explained it within a certain frame. For instance, the explanation for collaboration with nature was often not linked with the activities outside the farm, and social justice was discussed mostly in terms of securing economic and social well-being of organic food producers.

Not surprisingly, the answers about the most important principles reflected the similar elements of what have been diffused by the IFOAM throughout its organisational history. As already mentioned in the last section, the concept of working with the nature's system and humane way of treating animals have always constituted the central part of the definition of organic farming, while the social agenda, such as social justice and fair trade, has been articulated by this federation as an emerging concept since the early 90s. The findings of this study added more insights into these widely spread basic principles. They are itemised below.

1. The answers to the most important principles that distinguish organic farming from conventional farming showed certain distinction in their orientation toward farming method, a social-human centred focus, or a non-human centred focus.
2. All the interviewees considered the principle concerning farming method was the fundament. As regards this point, the majority supported the principle of ecology (working in compliance with the eco-system). This principle was regarded significant for the sake of environmental protection but also its effect on pest control.
3. While the primal focus of the principle of ecology remained in the activities on the farm, the principles around the closed system, holistic approach, recycling, and the use of renewable energy had a wider scope beyond the farm gate. They inclined to include the practices in the whole food system including food processing, distribution, and the returning of waste to the farm.
4. There were some principles indicating geographic discrepancy. The principles of social justice, empowerment of farmers/people, and fair trade were raised mostly by the interviewees from the South, while animal welfare and the focus on soil were particularly proposed by the persons from the West.
5. Some were apparently critical about the current trend of conventionalisation of organic farming, while many acknowledged such critique but still the development has been going forward to a right direction.
6. There were some fundamental differences in the concept of principles. Some stated the principles were something very difficult to achieve so that one constantly have to work on to approach them. On the other hand, some considered the principles stem from what are applicable to the actual practices, though the difficulty of applying them differs from place to place.
7. The interviewees were clearly divided at perceiving the principles as changeable by time or not. Some strongly believed that the principles were unchangeable, and expressed current non-clarity in the principles as a negative effect of "new" interests in the organic farming community, while some reversely claimed that the principles must be changed in accordance with the new knowledge.

Notes

This working paper aimed to illustrate, firstly, an overview of organisational history of the IFOAM and, secondly, the notions of the basic organic principles envisaged by the members of this federation. The time frame of this paper was limited to the time of the Victoria Congress in 2002, and many things have happened since then. The federation was restructured into more diversified branches with specific task, and a newly employed executive director does not have a background in the organic related field. As regards the organic principles, four principles, i.e. the principle of health, ecology, fairness, and care, were agreed at the latest General Assembly in Adelaide, Australia, in September, 2005. This re-formulation (or review in their term) of the principles was proposed by the World Board and agreed at Victoria General Assembly. The claim for reviewing the principles pointed to the increasing confusion about this issue, when the IFOAM stated them only vaguely as “*Principle objectives of organic farming,*” and the points raised there lacked “*consistency and coherence*” [Alrøe and Kristensen, 2004]. Albeit the author of this paper did not intensively follow this review process, the fundamental difference in understanding the “principles,” as also indicated by this study, was observed at the Adelaide General Assembly. Some, in particular the Task Force members on the review of principles, understood them to indicate “*ethical norms*” that can direct the general orientation of organic farming, and hence, the principles should not be too narrow and precise about a specific issue. In contrast, many insisted on stating a precise term as “*no-GMO*” was necessary to signify the spirit of organic farming. The claim of adding such word as non-GMO to the proposed draft did not succeed, whereas the word as “*food sovereignty*” proposed during the Assembly was included in the sentences of the principle of care by gaining sufficient votes from the members. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to note that the term “*closed system,*” which was laid on the top of the list in the first IFOAM basic principles in 1977, disappeared in the description of the new principles.

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Homepage

IFOAM homepage: <http://www.ifoam.org>.

Task force activities for IFOAM Basic Principles: <http://ecowiki.org/IfoamPrinciples/HomePage>

Appendix

Answers to the Question 2” What are the three most important principles for organic farming that differentiate organic farming from conventional farming for you?”

Status in IFOAM	Original Organization	Answers
SC	Bioland (Germany)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working in compliance with natural circles 2. No chemical fertilizer 3. Animal welfare
Former WB	Elm Farm Research Centre (UK)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Closed system 2. Component of health
President of the EU Regional Group	Soil Association (UK)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working harmony with natural systems of cycle 2. Close the system as possible 3. Respect the welfare of all involved including animals
Former WB	The Gami Sevana Ltc. (Rural Development Centre, Sri Lanka)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conservation 2. Re-cycling 3. Diversity
SC	OFDC (National institution, China)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Protecting rural environment 2. Encouraging environmentally friendly methods (less use of chemicals) 3. Producing high quality and enough supply
SC	Argencert (Argentina)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sustainability 2. Bio-diversity 3. No use of agro-chemical
Chairman of SC	GroLink (formerly KRAV, Sweden)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Taking care of soil 2. Quality of food
Active member	Earth Net Foundation(Thailand)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conservation and rehabilitation of eco-system on the farm 2. Linkage between organic farming and fair trade 3. Farmer learning about own capacity and managing it
Former President	(France)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Providing high quality and sufficient quantity 2. Not to deplete eco-system 3. People as central
Active member	AIAB (Italy)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fertility of the soil 2. Bio-diversity 3. Significant role of farmers
SC	OMRI (USA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use the renewable resources 2. Working with nature 3. Feed the soil
President	GroLink (Sweden)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working with Nature 2. Carry for the soil 3. Carry for the living
WB	AGRINAT (Senegal)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self management 2. Cherish farm as your guarantee 3. Liking people as a chain
Executive director	IFOAM (he is German)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Holistic approach (Closed cycle approach) 2. Animal ethics 3. Social Agenda
Board member of IOAS	Humus Consultancy (Malaysia)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ecology 2. Economy (self-support) 3. Sociality

WB	Naturland (Germany)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Holistic approach 2. Credibility of organic product 3. Linkage of social aspect and environment
IFOAM Guarantee System	(USA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect for the soil 2. Providing food for people and plants 3. Organic farming to become providing not only healthy but also collective system by people (both eating and producing)
WB	(Argentina)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To take care of the process in nature and learn how to co-operate with them 2. Read the landscape 3. Co-operation with people and nature
WB	JOAA (Japan)	Sustainability

WB: The World Board of the IFOAM

SC: The Standards Committee for the IFOAM

Status and belonged organisation refer to those at the time of interview.