

Organic farming values in Switzerland – results of a focus group study

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Abstract:

Eight focus group discussions, conducted in 2004 and 2005, about ethical values among established and recently converted organic producers (mountain and lowland area) and other stakeholders in Switzerland are summarised. The aim was to contribute to the elaboration of principles for the new EU regulation for organic food and farming as part of the EU Organic-Revision project. The participants' values were contrasted with the four new principles of organic production of IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements). Health and ecological sustainability were key issues. The producers saw secure livelihood, the maintenance of their family farm, authenticity, animal welfare and farming with nature as major issues. The system approach was important for other stakeholders. The major value conflicts were seen to arise from conventionalization and globalisation of the organic agriculture sector. Another central discussion point was the overregulation and inspection. Ethical values and principles should play a more important role in standard setting and trade.

Introduction and Objectives:

In Switzerland organic farming has a long tradition, starting with the first Swiss biodynamic farm, founded in 1928. Over the last ten years, the number of organic farms has increased strongly in particular in mountain areas, mainly due to a strong market demand. But currently growth is stagnating. In 2005, 11.2% of farms were organic (6,420 farms) on 10.5% of the land area (112,000 ha). The Swiss Federal Government has supported organic farming with direct payments since 1993. Like in other countries, the development of organic agriculture was characterised by fast growth, but also by large-scale production, involvement of large conventional companies and global trade. This development may threaten organic agriculture to function as an alternative for a more sustainable approach for mainstream agriculture and for the development of environmental and rural development policies. There is, therefore, renewed interest in values and principles that can guide the future development of organic farming. The focus group research study was conducted as part of the EU funded Organic Revision project (www.organic-revision.org, FP6-502397). It aimed to provide an overview of values held among organic farmers and stakeholders. The purpose was to deliver elements to the EU commission and actors to formulate principles for organic production for the revision of the EU regulation 2092/91. The research work coincided with the broad discussion process of the International organic movement, coordinated by IFOAM between 2004 and 2005, the results were compared with the new IFOAM principles (IFOAM 2005).

Methods:

Five focus groups discussions, conducted from November 2004 until January 2005, involved 36 mostly full-time producers from the German speaking part of Switzerland,

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representing a wide range of enterprises (livestock, arable crops, and horticultural crops) and of farm sizes. The farmers were recruited with assistance of regional organic farm advisors. The groups were formed of producers, who had converted their farms either before or after 1993, the year when nationwide grants were introduced in Switzerland, established and newly converted organic farmers accordingly. In the mountain area, one group came from a village, which converted in an early stage as a whole cheese cooperative to organic farming. A sixth group included the staff of the nationwide umbrella association of the producer organisations and logo owner (Bio Suisse), and a seventh group consisted of agricultural university students, who were relatively new to the subject of organic farming. The pre-test was held among the staff of the research institute for organic farming FiBL in Frick.

There was a common discussion guide for the focus group meetings which started with participants' own 'organic farming history'. Personal motives for conversion to organic farming were collected. The participants had then to extract from the personal motives common ethical values in a group discussion process. The values mentioned in each group were prioritized by voting (max. 3 points/participant). This led on to a discussion on potential value-conflicts and prospective values of organic farming in the future. Each focus group was fully recorded, transcribed and analysed with a special text analysis programme (ATLAS.ti). The results were integrated in and compared with the cross-country report in the Organic-Revision project (PADEL et al. 2005).

Results and Discussion:

The predominant personal motives for conversion that were mentioned were personal conviction, the guarantee for the origin of the self-produced food and doubts about conventional agriculture. These motives were less predominant for mountain farmers. Furthermore mainly early converters were very much influenced by the personality of pioneer farmers.

Out of these personal motives common ethical values were elaborated and voted in the group discussions (Tab. 1). The values are grouped following the four principles of organic agriculture by IFOAM, but include other values and principles mentioned by the discussion groups.

Health in general was mentioned by early converters and researchers. Related to this principle were often mentioned the cycle of "healthy soil – healthy plants – healthy animals – healthy humans". Healthy food and product quality were mainly important for lowland farmers and students. Here the focus was mainly on the production of high quality food without harmful residues. Several farmers mentioned also soil fertility.

Ecological sustainability was a major issue in most groups. The ecological principle is seen as important, although "*the farm should be managed in such a way to sustain a family economically*" (Converting mountain farmer). Biodiversity and landscape were mainly mentioned and prioritized by mountain farmers.

All major fairness value dimensions have been mentioned in the majority of the groups. Organic farming was and still is seen as a strategy to survive as a family farm and a possibility to earn a living (livelihood), mainly by mountain farmers. The direct payments and the better prices were seen as very helpful to improve or at least maintain the farm income. "*In order to guarantee a fair income for the farm, so that the family can live with and develop farm activities as well, the price should be fair and represent real production and processing costs charged to farmers*" (newly converted farmer). Subsidies were seen as controversial, since they are necessary, but they should also be distributed in accordance to real farmed land and to real needs.

Tab. 1: Ethical values and principles and their importance in CH focus group discussions. cF = converting farmers, LL = low land area, eF = established farmers, M = mountain area; A = Bio Suisse administrators, St = students, R = researchers (pre-test). Numbers show how often this value/motive did get one of the 3 priority points/participant, x this issue/value was discussed in the group, but did not get a priority point.

Values and principles	CH1 cF, LL	CH2 eF, LL	CH3 eF, LL	CH4 cF, M	CH5 eF, M	CH6 A	CH7 St	CH8 R
<i>Principle of health</i>								
Health in general		3	3		3			X
Food quality		x					5	
Soil fertility		3		3			x	
<i>Principle of ecology</i>								
Renewable resource use							4	
Ecosystem health	x					x	1	
Ecological sustainability	4		6		4	7	6	2
Lower energy use							2	
Bio-diversity promotion				4	x			1
Landscape diversity				3	1			
Cycling principle		x		1	x			
<i>Principle of fairness</i>								
Social sustainability			4					x
Economic sustainability			3					
Fair direct payments				1				
Rural employment				3				X
Family farm				8				
Livelihood for producers		1			5			
Social justice						3	2	x
Fair price		1			2			x
Self-Independence	x	1	1					x
<i>Principle of care</i>								
Avoidance of residues								x
Careful processing	2	1						
<i>Other principles/values</i>								
Integrity		3						3
Solidarity, cooperation	2		x					
Consumer orientation			1		2			
Authenticity	4	3			5			
Animal welfare/friendly	x			4	1			1
Farming with nature	3		x		2	4		
Holistic system approach						3	3	
Innovative approach						1		3

Generally the principle of care was not often mentioned. Taking care of nature was however the most occurring issue indirectly related to this principle, whilst avoidance of residues was slightly mentioned. GMO was not a major issue. The most important link was made between care and taking responsibility for future generations. This is corresponding with the sustainability concept. Animal welfare was for mountain farmers seen as important.

Not directly related to the IFOAM Principles some farmer groups mentioned: authenticity, integrity, more solidarity, consumer orientation as important values and principles. Non-farmers mentioned the holistic system approach and innovation.

Conflicts and synergies between ethical values

More synergies (positive interactions) between the different values were found and less conflicts (e.g. a healthy soil is promoting healthy animals). Value conflicts were mainly seen interfering from outside (with the price pressure, global market etc.) and less inside the organic agriculture movement. An external conflict was identified between the consumer behaviour and the values of organic agriculture: the current trends with regard to the consumer lifestyle and eating habits, in particular the trends to more convenience food and fast food as well as the trend to cheap or discount price, makes it difficult to maintain a high product quality profile for organic produce and fair prices. General conflicts with organic values deal with the decision whether to specialize and thus reduce the workload or to diversify the production but with more work (and thus have more income sources). Globalisation stands in conflict with the respect of natural growth and the product attribute of seasonality and regionality that is much valued by consumers of organic food products.

Conclusion:

The four IFOAM principles of health, ecology, fairness and care (IFOAM 2005) appeared to correspond to the values of Swiss organic farmers and other stakeholders. In addition other values were mentioned, like in other countries (PADEL 2005). The producers saw the maintenance of their family farm and the farm succession as major issue. Financial sustainability (maintaining income) is important to many producers, but should not dominate over all other values. Several farmers wished that there will be better solidarity and cooperation between farmers and market actors. In the light of conventionalization of the organic sector and bureaucracy, the survey revealed the need for the reflection about the political role of organic agriculture in the future. Farmers and non farmers expressed in their visions for the future that ethical values and principles should play a more important role in standard setting and trade and welcomed the integration of principles in the EU and Swiss regulation for organic food and farming.

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