

Making policy – A network analysis of institutions involved in organic farming policy

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Abstract

As organic farming has become an instrument of European agricultural policy, the organic sector is required more and more to become politically active. This paper presents results from an EU-funded project i) analysing the development of organic farming institutions for the period of 1997-2003 in eleven European countries and ii) investigating networks of organic farming policy on national and EU levels following the network analysis approach. The study concludes that institutions within the organic farming sector in new EU member states are still developing, and their relationship with mainstream farming institutions is characterised by a state of competition. In 15 (old) EU countries and Switzerland, this relation is more oriented towards co-operation and has been described as being in a state of creative conflict. Countries with a high share of organic farming show signs of consolidation of their institutions. Organic farming policy networks are bigger in size and denser in these countries compared to the small networks in new member states. Organic farming organisations, as well as state institutions play an important role in all national networks for organic farming policy-making. On the EU level, the network of organic farming policy actors is still at an initial stage. The different patterns of relationship between institutions and networks of the organic sector provide a basis for recommendations for political strategies of organic farming actors.

Introduction

Organic farming has stepped out of the niche and become more and more an issue and an instrument of agricultural policy in Europe (Dabbert *et al.*, 2004). Institutions that have not focussed on organic farming issues so far increasingly influence its framework. As a result, the sector has been forced to build up its own political structures to interact with both public authorities and the mainstream farming community. Agro-economic research has so far focussed on impact assessment of existing policy measures and the development of new policy instruments (e.g. Stolze, 2003). This contribution takes a structural perspective and highlights the functioning of policy networks. It is embedded in the framework for the analysis of participation of third sector organisations (or non-governmental organisations) provided by Casey (2004). He identifies four factors that determine the influence of such organisations in the policy process: the political and socio-economic environment, the nature of the policies they are seeking to influence, the characteristics and resources of the involved organisations and the network of actors. The research analyses the influence of different development stages of the organic sector on its institutions and their interaction with mainstream agriculture in eleven European countries. Furthermore, it shows to what extent policy networks have developed in order to influence organic farming policy and which network structures have been established.

Methodology

The study is based on two methodological approaches: The institutional development of the organic sector for the years 1997-2003 follows the concept Michelsen *et al.* (2001) developed in a survey of six countries for the years 1985-1997. Network analysis is applied for exploring how far organic farming policy networks have been established. Michelsen *et al.* (2001) described three types of interaction between institutions of the organic sector and the mainstream in the domains agriculture (farming), market and policy, labelled as “*cooperation*”, “*competition*” and “*creative conflict*”. Whereas the first two types of interrelation hinder further development of the organic sector (the distinction between organic and conventional is levelled down or contact between the two sectors is

completely missing, respectively), “*creative conflict*” is the basis for the development of organic farming. Michelsen *et al.* (2001) also introduced a path of six steps for a successful organic farming growth – a concept that we use as a basis for our analysis of 11 countries. These steps are: i) establishment of an organic community, ii) political recognition, iii) financial support, iv) positive involvement of the general farming community, v) established organic food market and vi) establishment of an institutional setting (see Table 1). In the current study Moschitz *et al.* (2004) on the one hand transfer the Michelsen *et al.* (2001) approach to new countries and, on the other hand, reapply it to some countries that were already included in the earlier study as a basis for comparison of institutional development between two periods of time. For studying how far policy networks have been established, how they work and how efficiently they function, network analysis has proved to be a suitable instrument. With its help one can explore which actors make up the organic farming policy network, who is powerful, and how close relations are within the organic sector, as well as between the organic and the mainstream agriculture sector. In addition, network analysis enables an objective comparison of policy networks in different countries (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Computing and visualising of the various network measures was done with UCINET (Borgatti *et al.*, 1999) and Visone (Brandes *et al.*, 2003) software.

Results

The analysis of how organic sector institutions have developed considers three groups of countries: a) new EU member states (CZ, EE, HU, PL, SI), b) old EU member states with an average organic sector (DE, EN, IT) and c) countries with a large organic farming sector (AT, CH, DK). Despite some remaining variance within these groups a number of group-specific characteristics of the institutional development could be identified (Moschitz *et al.*, 2004).

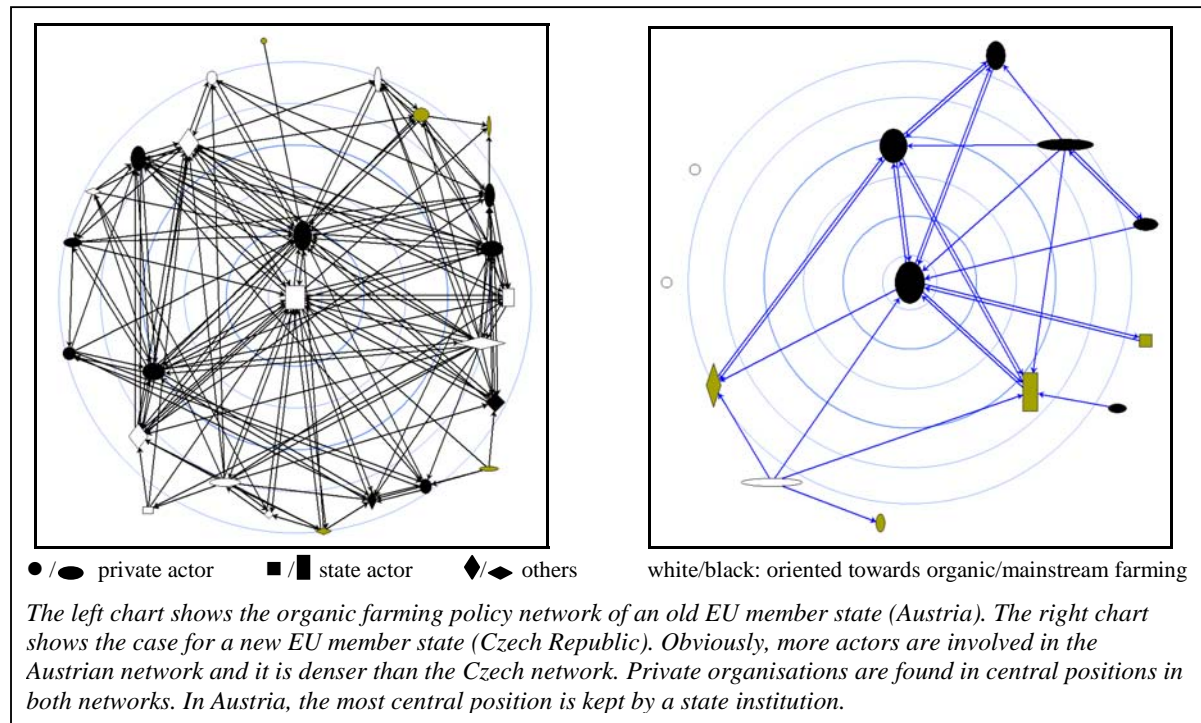
Table 1: Steps undertaken on the path for successful organic farming growth by different countries

Country group	① established organic sector	② political acceptance	③ financial support	④ acceptance by general farming community	⑤ established organic food market	⑥ institutional setting
New EU states	●	◐	●	○	○	○
old EU, average organic share	●	●	●	◐	●	◐
old EU, large organic share	●◐	●	●	●	●◐	●
○ missing	◐ partly completed		● fully completed		●◐ repeatedly undertaken	

Source: own representation

As can be seen from Table 1, in none of the new EU member states has the organic sector undertaken more than the first three steps on the path for a successful organic farming development. In countries with an average or large organic sector (except IT) all steps have been undertaken at least partly and some have been undertaken a second time. Institutions of the organic and the mainstream sector compete with each other in the new EU member states (except CZ), which clearly distinguishes them from the group of countries with a large organic sector. Here, constructive debate and mutual acceptance between the sectors dominates – a relationship that Michelsen *et al.* (2001) call “*creative conflict*”. In the group of countries with an average organic sector, such a relationship is only developing at present, and institutions necessary for “*creative conflict*” are still being built up. In comparison with the period 1985-1997 that was analysed by Michelsen *et al.* (2001), no significant change in the relationship between organic and mainstream institutions could be observed in countries with a large organic farming sector. The organic sectors in these countries show signs of consolidation. In contrast, those countries with an average organic farming sector that were also surveyed in the first study (DE and EN) show a greater dynamic. This dynamic is also mirrored by the higher growth rates of the share of organic farming in these countries compared to those with a large organic farming sector (Lampkin, 2004).

The question asked for analysing the organic farming policy network was “With whom do you collaborate closely?”. Organic farming policy networks in the countries studied vary with regard to size and the number of links established between actors (i.e. the level of stated collaboration). Figure 1 shows that old EU member states show a denser network with more actors involved compared to new EU member states. This indicates that the longer the history of the organic sector, the better developed are the policy structures. Networks also differ in terms of who occupies the central position: the state (in our example, this is the case for AT) or an organic sector organisation (in our example, this is the case for CZ). Within each country network, the analysis identifies players who are actively involved in



policy making and distinguishes them from actors who remain rather passive.

Figure 1: Two examples of organic farming policy networks in an old and a new EU member state

Source: own representation, computed with Visone (Brandes *et al.*, 2003)

Despite differences between countries some general characteristics of organic farming policy networks can be derived. In all networks organic farming organisations play the role of information brokers. They gather information from the actors and pass it on to other actors in the network. In those countries where organic farming organisations are politically recognised and cooperate with each other, they play the central role in the networks. In addition, the state is an influential actor in the policy networks, whereas organisations of the mainstream farming sector are rather found in the periphery. On the EU level, a network for organic farming has been only poorly established so far. However, expert interviews showed some potential for development as the importance of organic farming is broadly accepted by stakeholders.

Conclusions

Based on the framework for political influence developed by Casey (2004) we can draw some conclusions for the influence of organic sector organisations on the policy process. The political situation of organic farming differs from country to country. Obviously, overall political and socio-economic frame conditions are different in new and old EU member states. Transformation processes in the new member states are ongoing and still influence the environment in which policy is made (Prazan *et al.*, 2004). Organic farming has found its way into agricultural policy to varying extents, and thus the possibilities for organic farming organisations to lobby for their issue are different. Furthermore, the organic farming sector is established to different levels in each country, not only in terms of its size, but also in terms of unity of the farming community. Against this background the organic farming sector has built up different networks to influence policy processes. These networks, in turn, have an impact on the role that organic farming organisations can play in (organic) farming

policy making. Thus, the organic sector faces different challenges in different countries if it aims at increasing its political influence.

The development of the organic sector calls for dynamic institutions. To maintain organic farming identity and in order to sharpen the political profile of the organic sector debate with state and mainstream agriculture institutions is necessary. As soon as the organic sector is settled to a certain extent it is important that its organisations prevent creative conflict with other sectors from changing to “*pure cooperation*”. Such a change would jeopardize its distinctness from the conventional agricultural sector. The results of the analysis of the institutional development in connection with the network analysis results provide a basis for recommendations for political strategies of the organic sector. In order to effectively influence policy, the organic farming network should approach the existing network structures of mainstream agriculture policy. A cooperative relation with state agencies appears to be indispensable given their rather central position in the (organic) farming policy network. Cooperation within the organic sector is necessary to maintain a strong position in a constructive debate with the state and mainstream agriculture institutions. On the EU level, the potential of the organic farming sector to establish a network should be used. Ways have to be found to gain new allies and establish a permanent lobby for organic farming.

Abbreviations

AT	Austria	CH	Switzerland	CZ	Czech Republic
DE	Germany	DK	Denmark	EE	Estonia
EN	England	EU	European Union	HU	Hungary
IT	Italy	PL	Poland	SI	Slovenia

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