

Further Development of Organic Farming Policy in Europe with Particular Emphasis on EU Enlargement QLK5-2002-00917

D11: Discussion paper 2 European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming

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Summary

The aim of this discussion paper is to present a first evaluation of the European action plan for organic food and farming, in the context of key principles for organic farming policy intervention and national organic action plans.

The development of the EU action plan can be seen in the context of increasing policy interventions in organic farming by governments at national and EU level since the mid 1980s. The aims of these policy interventions are typically a combination of supporting consumer choice through development of the market for organic food and encouraging the provision of public goods (e.g. environment, animal welfare) through support for organic land management. At national level, action plans provide a mechanism to ensure a balanced policy mix reflecting these different aims and the various supply-push and demand-pull policy instruments available, tailored to local conditions.

At the EU level, the action plan is less focused on tailored solutions to local problems, and more on providing enabling frameworks for member state actions. However, the action points are strongly oriented towards the organic regulation defining organic food in the market place, with less emphasis on supporting the delivery of public goods, and with no targets or specific resources identified. Given the early stage of implementation, it is too early to say whether these perceived 'weaknesses' of the EU action plan can be overcome. At the same time, the development of the plan, and its adoption by the European Council of Ministers, represents a significant step forward in the process of integrating organic farming policy into mainstream policy making in the European Union.

This discussion paper is the second in a series of three produced as part the 'Further Development of Organic Farming Policy in Europe' (EU-CEE-OFP) research project. The first (Haering et al., 2005) addresses organic farming and rural development in the context of the proposed Rural Development Regulation 2007-2013. The third discussion paper (Slabe et al., 2005) addresses organic farming policy in the new EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe. The papers and other project reports can be downloaded from the EU-CEE-OFP website:
www.irs.aber.ac.uk/euceeofp.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Principles for organic farming policy development	2
3	Action plans for organic farming	4
4	The European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming	5
5	The European action plan – a preliminary evaluation	7
6	References	9

1 Introduction

By the end of 2003, organic farming in Europe accounted for 6.3 million hectares on 170,000 holdings (Willer 2005). Within one decade, the organically managed area in Europe had increased nine fold. Most of this land, just over 5.7 million ha, or 3.4% of the UAA, is in the old European Union, while the new member states account for just over 0.5 million ha. Wide variations within and between countries can be found. At national level, certified organic farming accounts for 7-10% of all agricultural land in Austria, Finland, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland, 3-6% in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Slovenia, Norway and the United Kingdom, with Spain rapidly catching up, and 2% or less in other European countries. (In Sweden, a further 7% of UAA is managed organically with agri-environmental policy support, but is not certified as such and therefore the products cannot be marketed as organic.) Organic farming is particularly strongly represented in extensive grassland-production regions, much less so in arable areas.

The growth in production has been accompanied by growth in the market and demand for organic products on a global scale. The strongest demand comes from the EU, USA and Japan, whilst some countries, particularly in the southern hemisphere, are strongly export oriented with more limited domestic markets. The European retail market is currently valued at more than €10.5 billion p.a. and similar in size to the USA. The growth rates, though lower than in recent years, are continuing at around 5-10% annually. Germany, Italy, France and the United Kingdom between them account for 75% of the European market (Kilcher et al. 2004; Hamm and Gronefeld 2004; Richter and Padel 2005).

Organic farming development in Europe has been stimulated mainly by two factors: strong consumer demand and policy support through

- i) EC Reg. 2092/91, the EU-wide legal basis for organic farming, and
- ii) area payments as an agri-environmental measure in the framework of EU rural development programmes (EC Reg. 2078/92 and 1257/1999).

Policy support can reinforce positive market signals in good times, or provide a security cushion in bad times. However, uncertainties about policy directions, for example over the implementation of CAP reform, as well as administrative delays and resource issues, can also undermine producer confidence and may distort market development, contributing to boom and bust conditions. Indeed, the potential conflicts between policy support and market development have now become a significant issue for policy-makers.

Responding to concerns that such 'supply-push' measures can impact negatively on the markets for organic products, policy-makers have started to take a more integrated approach to policy using the 'action plan' mechanism. This involves detailed analysis of the specific development needs of the sector and the application of a mix of demand-pull and supply-push measures in a co-ordinated way to help address the needs identified. Typically, growth targets are also set, normally in terms of land area. Action plans can be found in most EU countries and an action plan for organic farming at EU level was published in 2004 (EC 2004).

The aim of this discussion paper is to evaluate the concept of action plans in general and the European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming in particular, with the aim of identifying potential areas for future policy development.

2 Principles for organic farming policy development

Historically, in the absence of other support, organic producers turned to the consumer to support their principles and practices. Originally the organic food market developed as a means to an end, in effect providing compensation to producers for the internalisation of externalities (e.g. environment, animal welfare), but the market has now become an end in itself, or at least is often seen as such. Today, consumers typically see organic food as healthy, safe and of high quality and for this they are willing to pay the price premiums for organic products. However many, if not most, are less strongly motivated by altruistic concerns such as the environment, animal welfare and social justice.

Government support for organic farming in recognition of its wider benefits began in the late 1980s, with national initiatives in countries like Denmark, Austria and Switzerland, as well as programmes in a few EU member states under the framework of the EU Extensification Programme (EU Reg. 4115/88). Since then, organic farming development has become more and more an instrument of state agricultural policy. With the legal definition of organic farming (EU Reg. 2092/91) in the early 1990s, it became possible to specifically include organic farming as a policy measure in the Agri-environment Regulation (2078/92), with the result that by 1996 almost all EU member states had introduced area-based support to encourage conversion to and (in most cases) also continued organic production. This support has carried on under the current Rural Development Regulation (1257/1999).

Governmental support, however, is not limited to area payments under agri-environmental and rural development programmes, moreover, the state started to regulate step by step areas which were originally a domain of the private organic sector (Stolze 2003). Indeed, with EU Reg. 2092/91 the EU provides the legally binding framework for organic production, processing, labelling, inspection and certification and thus defines what organic farming is (Dabbert 2001). Government support now also extends into areas such as research, market development and consumer promotion.

Thus the organic sector has developed from a sector opposing mainstream agricultural policy into a sector which is significantly influenced by agricultural policy (Dabbert 2001). In this context, it is relevant to ask why governments have chosen to take this step.

Based on Henrichsmeyer and Witzke (1994), Dabbert et al. (2004) argue that state intervention might be economically justified in cases where:

- Market failures arise due to the nature of the goods involved (e.g. public goods and externalities)
- Markets lead to an income distribution within a society which is considered unacceptable
- A lack of information severely impedes market functions
- The negative effects of earlier government interventions in markets needs to be corrected and eased by new interventions
- The nurturing of small/new industries in a pre-competitive phase so that they can grow sufficiently to overcome barriers to entry into an industry that might otherwise become anti-competitive or path-dependent because of the lack of new competitors.

Historically, the first policy support for organic farming within the framework of EU regulations, was developed using an instrument to address surplus production (EU Reg. 4115/88) and thus to correct previous state intervention on markets. Indeed in

the context of serious over-production in Europe, it can be understood that some policy-makers saw the lower productivity of organic farming as a positive advantage even though this is not necessarily a perspective that would have been shared by stakeholders.

However, subsequent policies have placed much more emphasis on market failure issues. Currently, there are two areas of market failure of particular relevance to organic farming policies in Europe: market failure in the context of the provision of public goods (environment, public health, animal welfare, social justice) and market failures due to lack of information and transparency in the immature organic market.

The first issue presents the challenge of how society's expectations can be met. Society is not homogeneous. Agriculture is expected to meet the differing goals of consumers, producers, the food industry, environmental and other special interest groups as well as policy-makers. These groups have different, sometimes conflicting, expectations and priorities and it can be difficult to meet these in the context of individual policy measures.

A further challenge for policy-making is that the concept of organic farming does not belong to government to modify and adapt at will. The concept has been developed by producers and interested individuals since the 1920s and sustained by consumers through specialist markets, particularly since the 1970s. Although it may now be increasingly owned or controlled by commercial and public institutions (regulators, policy-makers, research institutes, food industry), the need to involve stakeholders and respect their contribution / ownership in order to maintain the integrity of the concept is critical.

Therefore the policy challenge is how can society support a multi-functional, farming systems approach, which addresses multiple goals, serving a wide range of interest groups with differing priorities, using several policy instruments as well as the market mechanism? The solution requires an integrated approach to reconcile conflicts, but integration may also require targeted differentiation. An example of this is the key issue of how the right balance between policy support from government and consumer support via premium markets can be achieved.

There is clearly overlap between these issues - both market and policy support are important to achieve consumer, producer and public goals, but the balance is difficult to identify as the debate is often polarised or confused. To resolve this, it may help to separate the issues:

1. Organic **land management**, generating public benefits, should be supported from public funds (as, for example, other agri-environment schemes), to the extent that resources permit (and in proportion to the expected public benefits), but not limited by market demand. This model, which does not require participating holdings to be certified as organic, was originally applied in Sweden and is now being adopted in other Nordic countries.
2. Organic **food marketing**, responding more directly to consumer concerns relating to food quality, safety and health, should be supported through the market, underpinned by relevant quality, rural development and structural policy measures, but with market supply and demand being the key constraint. In this context, the premium price obtained in the marketing of organic food is more a direct reward to the marketing and entrepreneurial activities of the producer and other food chain actors, rather than compensation for internalising external costs or generating positive externalities on behalf of society.

3 Action plans for organic farming

While clearer differentiation may be one approach to resolving policy conflicts, as for example the distinction between supporting organic land management for the delivery of public goods while seeing the organic food market as an issue to be governed primarily by market supply and demand mechanisms, clearly there can still be interactions between the policy aims. Land management policies may have the provision of public goods as a main aim, but can still lead to increases in supply which may distort markets if demand is limited, and therefore undermine the second aim (although there can be positive impacts in the case of undersupplied markets).

The need for joined-up thinking is clear, but the key problem of balancing supply-push and demand-pull initiatives to achieve sustainable development of organic agriculture in support of environmental and rural development goals without undermining markets cannot be solved by looking at individual policy measures in isolation. An integrated approach is required. Many European countries (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) have chosen to address this through the development of integrated action plans (OECD 2003) in an attempt to achieve a better policy mix, with some now implementing second action plans. The range of approaches adopted, however, illustrates the problems and the political pressures inherent in achieving this, with some, such as in England and the Netherlands, having a more overtly market focus while others give a higher weighting to environmental issues.

Organic farming action plans normally include targets for adoption (typically 5-10% by 2000/2005 or 10-20% by 2010), as well as a combination of specific measures including direct support through agri-environment/rural development programmes; marketing and processing support; producer information initiatives; public procurement initiatives; consumer education/promotion, and infrastructure support.

Table 1: Examples of action plan targets for organic food and farming in the European Union

	Organic share of total agricultural area (% of UAA)	By (year)
Denmark	12 (=170kha)	2003
Czech Republic	10	2010
Finland	10	2006
France	5	2005
Germany*	20	2010
Netherlands	10	2010
Portugal	7	2007
Slovenia	20	2015
Sweden	20	2005
Wales	10-15	2010

* Bundesprogramm (Federal organic farming scheme)

Source: Stolze et al. (2006 forthcoming)

The more detailed plans contain evaluations of the current situation and specific recommendations to address issues identified, including measures to ameliorate conflicts between different policy measures. They are thus tailored packages reflecting local and often short-term priorities. A further key element of many action plans is the active involvement and integration of stakeholders in a partnership approach to policy development, implementation and evaluation.

4 The European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming

The European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming (EC 2004) is the result of a five-year process of developing the Action Plan starting with EU and national government sponsored conferences on organic farming in Vienna in 1999 and Copenhagen in 2001 (ETM, 1999; DMFAF 2001). As a result, the Council of Ministers meeting in Goteborg in June 2001 called on the Commission to establish a plan. Following an initial survey of stakeholders in October 2001, independent expert and member state working groups were established in 2002. The first Commission working paper on issues to consider in an action plan was submitted to the Council of Ministers at the end of 2002. This was followed by a public internet consultation in March 2003, a European Parliament hearing in June 2003 and a public hearing in January 2004, although at none of these events was a specific proposal for a plan available for discussion. Out of this process, a plan was developed and presented to Council of Ministers in June 2004 (EC 2004) with no further opportunity for public comment, although member states were subsequently asked for comments and many have instituted consultations with stakeholders. The plan was formally accepted by the Council at its meeting in October 2004, with specific recommendations for priority actions (CEU 2004). At the end of 2004, the European Parliament's agriculture committee debated the plan and tabled a detailed report to the Parliament commenting on specific actions (Aubert 2005), but at the time of writing these have not been reflected in any changes to the plan itself.

The plan published at the end of this five year process in June 2004 contained 21 action points. But before considering the merits of the plan as published, it is worth highlighting some general principles for successful action plan development based on previous experiences.

The purpose of existing national or regional action plans is to integrate different, sometimes conflicting, policy measures in the simultaneous pursuit of multiple policy goals. An effective plan requires the definition of relevant objectives and targets, clear priority setting, and a plan for how to implement the actions suggested. It should be developed in a partnership approach together with stakeholders and public institutions. Building on Hamm and Gronefeld (2004), Dabbert et al. (2004), Häring et al. (2004) and our own work, the key areas an action plan should address are:

- a balanced mix of 'supply-push' and 'demand-pull' policy measures;
- remuneration of organic farmers for provision of public goods and services;
- integration of market and public support mechanisms;
- improved market transparency by providing production and market data;
- improving the function of the organic chain through information, education, technology development, research and extension with respect to production, processing and distribution;
- reviewing related policies in order to identify conflicting and potentially supportive policy areas;
- consumer information strategies including an approach to easily recognise organic products and to improve consumer confidence in organic food;
- support for creative conflict between conventional and organic farming organisations in order to stimulate innovation and improvement;
- empowerment of stakeholders (in particular consumers and organic producers)

- development of a risk based and internationally harmonised approach for inspection and certification;
- simultaneous recognition of organic and conventional farming systems in agricultural policy in general;
- formulation of clear strategic targets/goals.

This also implies a focus on specific, often local, issues that need to be addressed with tailored measures. But if one of the justifications for the focus at national or regional level is the targeting of specific local issues and bottlenecks, what would be the purpose of an action plan at the EU level?

By definition, the European Commission is responsible for providing the regulatory framework for agricultural policy in the European Union, providing a basis for action at member state level. Therefore, the focus at the EU level would be much less on detailed measures and implementation, providing instead:

1. strategic context and vision for organic farming's potential contribution to EU agriculture, with clear objectives and targets for the sector's development;
2. recognition and exploitation of the potential contribution of organic farming to general agricultural, environmental and rural policy goals, together with research and other initiatives to enhance organic farming's performance with respect to these goals;
3. an enabling framework for supporting organic farming with the right policy mix at local level, considering the areas listed above, including the minimisation of conflicts between individual initiatives;
4. optimal conditions for trade and functioning of the market mechanism supported by high standards of production, quality, safety and service, reflecting stakeholder and public interests in sustainable market development and fair trade;
5. a mechanism for sharing of expertise and resources between countries and regions;
6. support for specific programmes in the new EU member states, particularly with respect to capacity building; and
7. identification of specific initiatives, for example with respect to organic standards and promotion, that are best undertaken at the EU level.

The institutional context in which the plan is implemented is also important. To be successful, the European action plan needs:

- anchoring in 2092/91, Rural Development, Structural and other relevant regulations,
- adequate resources
- appropriate institutional structures
- positive interaction with national and regional plans, and
- buy-in from stakeholders, EU institutions and national/regional administrations,
- to be subject to monitoring, evaluation and regular revision.

Against this background, and the reactions to the plan expressed by ministers (CEM 2004), parliamentarians (Aubert 2005), stakeholders (IFOAM 2004) and others in the various conferences and hearings held before and during the development of the plan, it is relevant to ask how well the plan as it finally emerged succeeds in addressing these issues.

5 The European action plan – a preliminary evaluation

The vision set out in the plan recognises the dual role for organic farming with production for the market to meet consumer demand and land management providing public goods and states the need to develop a balanced approach addressing both roles. But there is no clear statement on where organic farming fits within future development of European agriculture, or how the plan interacts concretely with CAP reform or the reform of the Rural Development Regulation. More importantly, the action plan failed to include any clear objective or target setting.

In addition, as organic farming grows, the size of the sector will begin to impact on the overall supply and market situations for agricultural products in the EU, and this will need to form part of the considerations for ongoing reform of the main Pillar 1 measures. Therefore, while the EU may hold back from setting a global target for organic production, some consensus on the longer-term potential of the sector is still important.

Looking at the 21 action points suggested, only six relate to issues that are not concerned with standards and the implementation of the EC Reg. 2092/91, and of these, two simply encourage member states to fully utilise existing rural development options and propose a web-based menu listing all rural development support available for organic farming. There is a welcome commitment to strengthen research (now well established under FW5 and FW6), to improve market transparency through providing statistical data and to develop information and promotion campaigns (incl. the EU logo) and there is a proposal to top up support for fruit and vegetable producer organisations.

The remaining 15 action points relate to:

- the definition of the principles of organic farming;
- ensuring the integrity of organic farming by reinforcing standards;
- harmonisation of standards;
- establishing an independent expert panel to advise on changes;
- launching a database on private and state norms;
- introducing a risk based inspection and certification approach;
- monitoring and accreditation of inspection bodies;
- increasing recognition of third countries and equivalency;
- increasing global recognition of EU standards.

In summary, the action plan takes up very important issues for the further development of organic farming standards through EC Reg. 2092/91, some of which have now been addressed through the publication in December 2005 of a draft proposal to fully revise this regulation (EC 2005a). It also stresses the importance of information provision to both organic actors and consumers and thus sets a baseline for balanced 'push' and 'pull' strategies.

However, many of the action points are ones which were already in progress and are the responsibility of the Commission's organic farming unit. The remaining actions relate to enhancing or encouraging member states to make better use of existing measures. There is no consideration of interaction of organic farming with the main parts of CAP and many other key areas discussed in the independent expert working

group (such as public procurement) are not covered. Furthermore, the action plan says nothing about how and by when the suggested actions should be implemented and what the priority areas are (although there is guidance on this from the Council of Ministers and European Parliament decisions).

Looked at critically, there appears to be only limited support from the rest of the Commission, with little practical emphasis on public good issues, no clear link to themes in national plans, no targets or substantive vision, no clear framework setting for organic farming development in the EU, no significant allocation of new resources and no clear integration of stakeholders. For many, this is a significant disappointment. But has the action plan really failed?

It is worth reflecting on the impact of the action plan process and the political message of the action plan document. On the positive side it can be seen that the process engaged senior levels of the Commission more than previously and strengthened the involvement of the organic sector in policy-making at EU level. More importantly however, the action plan

- expresses the relevance of organic farming in the context of the EU agricultural policy,
- suggests at least a first set of actions, and
- recognises the dual societal role of organic farming (land management for public goods and organic food marketing to meet consumer demand) in an official EU document (EC 2004).

This might appear to be a banal statement at first sight, but in fact it means that for the first time the organic sector is in a situation where reference can be made to an official EU document and not just to papers from researchers or lobby groups. In this respect, the organic action plan constitutes a significant milestone.

Furthermore, it is important to see the action plan as another step in the process of the development of organic farming rather than considering it as a static document. This is of particular relevance, as the Commission is:

- a) responsible for developing an implementation plan, responding to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, and
- b) preparing the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme (EC 2005b), which provides the opportunity to anchor organic farming more specifically in EU legislation and to secure appropriate budget allocations.

Key steps have now been taken by the Commission along this path. Since 2005 the Commission's organic farming team has been given formal 'Unit' status with a dedicated head of unit and additional staff and brought under the responsibility of the Deputy Director General for Agriculture with responsibility for rural development. Organic farming and the European action plan feature in the European strategic guidelines (EC 2005c) for the implementation of the 2007-2013 Rural Development Regulation, with recognition that support for organic farming and the implementation of the action plan must be built across all the main rural development axes, providing a strong basis for the formal integration of national or regional action plans into member state rural development plans. Specific actions, such as the reform of regulation 2092/91 and the development of consumer promotion activities have now been initiated, with some allocation of targeted resources to this work. All these steps are encouraging signs that the implementation of the plan is being taken seriously, but only time will tell if the plan can live up to expectations and make a real difference to the development of organic farming in Europe.

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