

What is the working environment like on organic farms?

Submitted by Lene Hansen

A good working environment is part of the fundamental values in organic farming. In Denmark the association of organic farmers state, that the aim of organic farming is “to give everyone involved in the organic production a high quality of living”. But how do the organic farmers actually experience their own working situation? And what factors play a part in their daily physical as well as psychological working environment? These were the questions we set out to answer in a project at the Danish Institute of Agricultural Science.

The project shows that the farmers' perception of their working environment is a very personal experience that is related to the individual farmer's resources and abilities. But it also identifies a number of problems that the farmers share. It is the administration and control of the organic regulations and the development towards bigger farm units that face the organic farmers with the biggest challenges in regard to their working situation.

Visiting the Organic Farmers

The project is based on farm visits and open-ended qualitative interviews with 9 organic farmers: 3 farmers with plant production, 3 poultry farmers and 3 dairy farmers. The visits took place in December 2003. A case description was made for each of the farms on the basis of the interviews. This description presented what the particular farmer experienced to be the most significant issues related to the working environment in his production. The case descriptions formed the basis for identifying the general themes, which are presented here.

Traditionally one thinks of the work environment as the physical strains and actions people are exposed to during a working situation, but since farming in Denmark in many ways are tied to larger social and cultural contexts, we also in this project wanted to examine how the organic farmers experienced their psychological and social working environment.

Physical Strains

The physical strains are not the primary concerns of the organic farmers, but there are a few exceptions however.

Among the farmers with plant productions, treating the weeds is a significant problem. It is the handling of the standing weeds, like couch grass and thistles that causes problems. In order to tackle these weeds efficiently it takes manual labour, which physically is a large and time-consuming strain. At the same time the very low prices on grain that has been seen in Denmark the last few years have made it increasingly difficult to cover the extra expenses added by manual labour. The farmers therefore seek research in areas that can provide them with new tools to ease the heavy burden in working with the weeds.

For others the organic production means that they have a larger multiplicity in their crops. This can cause stress and problems with the work load during the spring and summer seasons, because the crops must be treated and harvested at different times.

The Administration of the Organic Regulations

If we take a look at the psychological working environment, the administration of the organic regulations constitutes one of the most significant workloads, but there are many conflicting experiences of the regulations. The organic farmers emphasise, that they themselves have chosen to produce under the organic regulations, at that they value the rules and the control of the rules, because they think it is crucial to their creditability and argumentation in relation to the consumers and the surrounding society. But in practice they find the system incredibly complex and inflexible to manoeuvre in.

The farmers describe a pressure in terms of time in administering the regulations, and in periods where there is a lot to do in the fields and the stables, it can be difficult for them to cope with it all. But they also describe a pressure related to the concerns they have about whether they have filled out the paperwork correctly, have met the application dates and have been updated on possible changes in the regulations.

They find the regulations increasingly difficult to survey. Some of them have had conflicts with the regulating authorities, with financial losses in consequence; this is stressing and causes concerns amongst the farmers. Due to this a great number of them choose to let the agricultural consultants execute this part of the work, but that presents them with considerable expenses for the consultants' advice.

It is fair to say that for the majority of the farmers there is a tendency towards the regulations being perceived no longer as *our* but on the contrary as *their* rules. This experience is reinforced by the fact that the subsidies in modern farming constitute a considerable part of the farmer's income. So to keep a good economy on the farm, it is no longer sufficient to be a good craftsman, as one of the producers put it, one also needs to be a good administrator.

On the whole the farmers describe an increase in the extend of the administration and the reporting to the authorities, and the time spend working in the office is for a number of them increasing. They do believe however that this is a tendency that reaches beyond organic farming and is characteristic of Danish farming in general. Some are okay with these developments, others stress that this is not a part of their profession they feel passionately about.

Among the plant producers there is a further concern for the development in the organic rules taking place internally in the Danish organic farming association. They fear a change in the rules in the next couple of years towards a phasing out the use of liquid manure from conventional farming.

In their opinion this would reduce the possibilities of an organic plant production, because it will be difficult for them to meet their need for nutrients to the crops.

Concerned with the Marketing Possibilities

Another problem concerning the psychological working environment is the marketing possibilities and the structural developments occurring in the farming industry. These are circumstances that are hard for the producers to influence or change, but which none the less and maybe due to this can cause a lot of concern and seem very difficult for the farmers to relate to. The farmers sometimes experience large movements in their financial results on their farms from year to year, and both the plant producers and the poultry farmers as well as the dairy producers mention fluctuating prices for their products as a considerable psychological pressure. There is also a concern with the lack of consumer backup for the organic products amongst the organic farmers, as well as a fear that the market and the purchasers will lower the prices for the producers.

The project hereby shows that the farmers working environment is influenced by a variety of factors both on and beyond the farm unit and can therefore not be seen as something solely connected to the individual farmer and his particular production.

Working Hours, Workload and Social Relations to Employees

Amongst the dairy farmers it is the working hours and the workload that cause the main problems. They have strenuous periods when they produce their silage, but also many daily working hours, and here it is the milking of the cattle in particular that takes up a large percentage of their time. All the farmers point to time as one of the most contributing factors to how they experience their working environment. It is important to have the time needed in order to do the daily tasks satisfactory. The question of relief and employees therefore becomes one of the most important questions for the farmers.

Having employees on the farm is both a source of joy and sorrow. On one hand the farmers point out that it provides them with a larger freedom to take holidays and be relieved on weekends. In some cases it makes it easier to have a well functioning family life, and it provides the farmer with professional inputs. On the other hand it creates a dependency in relation to the persons that are hired, and it changes the social relations on the farm. The farmer then has to fill the roll of the employer. He needs to tackle relations to the employees, including the difficulties there may be amongst the employees themselves, and he has to plan and structure their working day. Several of the farmers mention that they feel poorly equipped to do this, and several of them point to the fact that due to the developments in the size of the farms, this becomes an increasingly important issue. They wish to have their abilities to lead and their cooperative competences developed and improved. 8 out of the 9 farms already have employees and staff found outside of their family.

Organic Farming Demands more Management from the Farmer

The employees play an important part in providing relief for the farmer in relation to the daily physical and practical workload, but some of the farmers also seek relief in making management decisions on the farms. They explain that it is not so much the hours they physically spend working in the fields or in the stables, but more the hours they spend contemplating their production, that is strenuous. When the farms grow, the strategic planning takes up more of the farmers' time, and several of them feel they need help in this area, they need help to have their thoughts and considerations voiced and debated. Professional groups with other farmers and agricultural consultants are highlighted as some of the already existing useful tools to handle these aspects.

At the same time the farmers point out that management generally speaking means more in organic farming. They have fewer solutions to problems that might occur and they need to think more preventive. This is experienced as both negative and positive. It is perceived as positive that it gives the farmer more agronomic challenges, but this in return puts pressure on the farmer. At the same time the organic farmers are very dependent on weather conditions. The weather is a big factor when they need to treat the weeds in spring and when they ensile during summer. Once again it is in principle a fact that the farmers appreciate and value, but the weather factor can also make the working situation stressful. They need to consider when the best time to act is, and the decisions can have great consequences for the yields they achieve on their fields.

The Professional Pride and the Pleasures of Working as an Organic Farmer

However it is not only negative experiences that characterize the working situation for the organic farmers. The project shows that there are a number of things that provide pleasure in the daily

working lives of the organic farmers. The majority of the farmers have a background in conventional farming, and in the interviews they draw parallels to their working situation in the conventional production. They point out that the working environment in organic farming can compete, and they do not think that their working environment has deteriorated after their conversion, for some it is more likely the other way around.

All of the 9 farmers mention the absence of pesticides as an appreciable improvement of their physical as well as psychological working environment. Not handling the chemicals gives them mental and physical well being. Experiencing an improved health and welfare in the animals, in the soil and in the crops is not without significance for the pleasure of being an organic farmer. It brings joy knowing *"that you are doing the right thing"* as one of the producers put it. At the same time it is important to some of the farmers that the organic production is recognised and respected amongst the wider population.

Generally speaking the farmers feel that the organic farming praxis provide them with great agronomical challenges and demands good competences both in terms of craftsmanship and in terms of management. This is something they enjoy, and it gives them a professional pride when things succeed on the fields and in the stables, because they feel that it is harder as an organic farmer. It is satisfying for them to learn new things and to develop professionally.

The Need for a Better Dialogue and a Straightening of the Collaboration

What are the prospects for developing and improving the working situation for the organic farmers? The farmers point out two central areas where efforts could be made. First of all they want the communication strengthened between the farmers and the authorities, which control and administrate the organic regulations. There is a clear feeling that both parties lack knowledge of each other's way of working and a great need to establish a better dialog between the farmers and the directorate. The organic farmers could benefit from a co-operation with the authorities about the practical implementation of new rules and regulations. They are looking for guidance in the dialogue. Several of the organic farmers also wish for a simplification of the complex organic regulations and a simplification of the farmers present reporting to the directorate of plants.

Secondly there is a wish to have the collaboration and the social relations in farming strengthened and developed. This goes for the co-operation internally on the farms between the farmers and the employees, here the farmers as mentioned ask for competences to cope with the roll of leader they get when they have employees; but also the wider co-operation between the farmers becomes important. It is necessary in order for the farmers to handle the workload and the relatively many working hours that they have.

The structural developments towards larger and still more mechanised farms that have taken place during the last decades in conventional farming, also exists within organic farming. The farmers get more land and more animals to look after. When the farms grow, the strategic planning becomes more important to manage. It becomes more difficult for the individual farmer to cope with all the decisions regarding the production, the financial investments, the working hours and the workload on his own. The machinery gets bigger and they gradually require large financial investments to purchase. 8 out of the 9 farmers already have co-operations with other farmers on machines or they use machine pools. The contemporary family life also has a part to play. On 8 out of the 9 farms it is only one of the spouses who is employed in the production full time. This compounds the need for relations with colleagues outside the farm.

Put together all of these tendencies mean that the farmers seek added cooperation between the farms, they agree that this will be crucial to the coming development and growth in organic

farming. Several of the farmers stress that it is necessary to consider the future forms of ownership in farming. The developments in the size of the farms and in the organic regulations constantly demand the farmers' personal abilities to cooperate, to develop and to change, and they seek tools to tackle these new changes.

Lene Hansen

E-post: lene.hansen@agrsci.dk

Tlf. + 45 89991287

Lene Hansen is a social anthropologist working as a research assistant at the Department of Agroecology in Foulum, The Danish institute of Agricultural Science.

The project has been carried out as part of the project "Demonstration and development of new organic agricultural systems", which is financed by Direktoratet for FødevareErhverv. This article is a translation of an article submitted to Forskningsnytt om økologisk landbruk i Norden.

Plant producers	
1.	<p>83 hectares of plant production. Converted in 1998. 1 employee + 1 owner.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> The absence of pesticides. Experiencing life and improved health in the soil. Professionally challenging. “Knowing you are doing the right thing”.</p> <p><u>Physical workloads:</u> <i>Standing weeds:</i> Gives heavy work processes when treated manually, requires a lot of staff and labour time. <i>Multiplicity in crops:</i> Means an increase in treatments and work processes during the spring and summer seasons.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>The organic regulations and control:</i> Concerned with the development in the organic regulations towards a phasing out of conventional liquid manure. Have had problems with the measuring up of fields, and the registration of fields. Takes time to handle these cases. Financially it means delays in subsidy payments <i>Working hours and production planning:</i> The weather has become a bigger factor in planning, this means that they are under pressure in terms of workload when they are treating the weeds.</p>
2.	<p>400 hectares of plant production. Converted in 1977–2000. 3 employees + 1 owner.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> Absence of pesticides. Good results in the fields: clean fields and good yields.</p> <p><u>Physical workloads:</u> <i>Standing weeds:</i> Would like to work manually with the standing weeds, but have not got enough staff.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>The organic regulations and control:</i> Concerned with the development in the organic regulations towards a phasing out of conventional liquid manure. The administration of the control and the applications are stressful. <i>Working hours and production planning:</i> The weather has become a bigger factor in planning, this means that they are under pressure in terms of workload, when they are treating the weeds. <i>Marketing:</i> The dropping prices on grain have meant that they have had to reduce their staff. They are concerned with the future marketing possibilities and prices.</p>
3.	<p>150 hectares of plant production. Converted in 1998. 1 employee + 1 owner.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> The absence of pesticides. Professionally challenging. Close relationship with the employees. Plenty of time for the daily tasks.</p> <p><u>Physical workload:</u> <i>Standing weeds:</i> Gives heavy work processes when treated manually, requires a lot of staff and labour time.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> The standing weeds make them dependent of labour outside of the farm, which makes it difficult if they cannot find staff. <i>Working hours and production planning:</i> Long-term planning has become more significant. This is a positive thing, but it is also demanding. The weather has become a bigger factor in planning, this means that they are under pressure in terms of workload, when they are treating the weeds.</p>

Table 1: The organic plant producers’ perception of their working environment.

Poultry farmers	
4.	<p>2300 chickens. The production started in 1998. 1 owner who works part-time.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> The short, flexible working hours. In good harmony with having a family life. Working with the animals. The absence of pesticides. Having an active and varied working life.</p> <p><u>Physical workloads:</u> Heavy lifts with feeding and strewing hay. Hard on her back. A lot of dust in the stable, cause irritation in her nose and throat.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>Marketing:</i> At present there is salmonella on the farm, this cause concerns psychologically. Worried they will not be able to get rid of it. <i>Animal welfare:</i> Cannibalism has in shorter periods been a problem, unpleasant psychologically.</p>
5.	<p>7500 chickens + 104 hectares of plant production and forest. Converted in 1995-1997. 1 employee + 1 owner.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> professionally challenging. The increasing importance of management and the added freedom of action.</p> <p><u>Physical work loads:</u> The owner has incurred a work related back injury earlier, because of this he doesn’t participate in the practical work to a great extend and have no special remarks regarding the physical working environment.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>Animal welfare:</i> Has had difficulties controlling the clotting in some of the groups. <i>Marketing:</i> The prices in the egg production have been very fluctuated. Psychologically it causes pressure having to relate to the fluctuated incomes. Difficult to sell the chickens as meat when they finish as egg layers, therefore often put down and sent to Daka. <i>Working hours:</i> Long working days in the summer. The chickens stay out late and rise early.</p>
6.	<p>13500 chickens. 114 hectares of plant production. Converted in 1990-1991. 2 employees working full-time, 1 part time + 1 owner.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> Varied work. Working with the animals. Starting up new groups of chickens.</p> <p><u>Physical workloads:</u> A lot of dust in the stables. Ammonia problems in one of the stables.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>The organic regulations and control:</i> Administrating the regulation is mentally straining. Has had disagreements with the control a couple of times, and this is a great stress factor. Misses the regulation debate that earlier was very present amongst the organic farmers themselves. <i>Working hours and employees:</i> Have bought a second farm in order to have employees. Appreciate the freedom and the relief this gives, but problems in the relationships between the employees are hard to tackle emotionally. Long working days with tasks spread out over most of the hours in the day.</p>

Table 2: The organic poultry farmers’ perception of their working environment.

Dairy farmers	
7.	<p>100 cows + 100 hectares of plant production. Converted to organic farming in 1995. 1 employee + 1 owner.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> The absence of pesticides. Being an organic farmer he is perceived positively in a social context. Agronomical challenging. Satisfying when he succeeds with his production strategies.</p> <p><u>Physical workloads:</u> <i>Multiplicity in crops:</i> Means an increase in treatments and work processes during the spring and summer seasons.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>Working Hours:</i> stressed when ensiling. The weather is important and decisions made can have a large significance financially.</p> <p><i>Production planning and marketing:</i> Management has become more important, this is both challenging and stressful. Concerned with marketing options and fluctuating prices on milk. Stressful and causes reflections on the necessity of expanding the production.</p>
8.	<p>76 cows + 200 hectares of plant production. The production was started in 1996. 1 employee full-time, 2 part-time + 2 owners.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> working with the animals. Are received positively as organic farmers in the local community. When their production succeeds with the crops and the cattle. That the farm now has reached a scale, which can pay for employees.</p> <p><u>Physical workloads:</u> No comments.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>Organic regulations and control:</i> Complex and time consuming to administer the control and the reporting to the authorities.</p> <p><i>Working hours and employees:</i> Many working hours and long working days. Dependent on a well functioning relationship with the employees. They have had problems with the relations, which is hard emotionally. On the other hand it is a source of joy and help, when it works.</p>
9.	<p>140 cows + 220 hectares of plant prod. Converted in 1997. 3 employees full-time, 2 part-time + 1 owner.</p> <p><u>Positive aspects:</u> The absence of pesticides. More relaxed working with the crops. Working with the animals and their welfare.</p> <p><u>Physical workloads:</u> No comments.</p> <p><u>Psychological workloads:</u> <i>Organic regulations and control:</i> Time consuming and complex system to manoeuvre in. Great financial significance getting the maximum out of the subsidies.</p> <p><i>Working hours and employees:</i> Important to have employees, provides the opportunity to take holidays and ensures professional development and debate. However stressful to plan their tasks and structure their working day. Must be aware of his role as a leader, feels he lacks tools to tackle this.</p> <p><i>Production planning and structural developments:</i> The management mentally draining. Tough to make big decisions on his own. Have recently decided to extend the production and build a new stable, means many decisions to make.</p>

Table 3: The organic dairy farmers' perception of their working environment.