

The Case Study Method in Organic Research

Peter Midmore, Susanne Padel and Markus Schermer

Abstract - This paper argues that the systematic complexity of agriculture requires a methodological pluralism, and that case studies, used hitherto as an ad hoc and exploratory approach, might be developed as a rigorous and appropriate investigational tool in their own right, with particular relevance for the organic sector. It provides a review of the main outlines of the approach and illustrates its application in the context of marketing initiatives and their impact on rural development processes. It concludes that important insights into how and why policies work can be obtained from a comparative case study framework, which cannot be wholly obtained from other approaches.¹

INTRODUCTION

Historically, organic agriculture has (however unfairly) attracted an 'unscientific' reputation, and external perception that its selective avoidance of aspects of contemporary technological practice was backward-looking. A consequence may be that organic research has taken on the framework and rigour of mainstream science to overturn this prejudice. However, use of essentialist inductive reasoning to generate statistically valid conclusions has, until recently, been limited by the size of the sector and the lack of available observations. This paper argues that to study organic farms in the context of and their impact on regional development a subtler, more flexible and comprehensive method of investigation is required, due to the systematic complexity of agriculture (itself an inspiration for the development of the organic approach), its adaptation to locally diverse conditions and its extensive interdependence with economic and cultural (political, social and historic) factors. Two main sections follow this introduction: the first provides a sketch of the tradition of case study research in qualitative inquiry, and identifies why it is appropriate for organic research; the second describes an application which considers the relationship between organic farming and rural development (although does not provide the results: for these see Midmore et al., 2005). A brief final section reviews the implications for organic research practice.

THE CASE STUDY METHOD

A key distinction between quantitative and qualitative research contrasts the focus on a few variables

in many cases with "... an in-depth investigation of a discrete entity (which may be a single setting, subject, collection or event) in the assumption that it is possible to derive knowledge of wider phenomenon from intensive investigation of a specific instance or case ..." (Becker 1970: 75). The approach enables investigation of many variables within a distinct context, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative information. By examining several case studies, cross-case analysis might provide further interesting insights.

Whilst well established organic farms have been used as case studies to investigate organic farming, they have been perceived as a response to insufficient data, as exploratory and as a preliminary to generating robust theories and have often ignored human actors. However, a strengthening of the rigour and consistency of the approach, going beyond the merely descriptive and tentative, allows the method to integrate insights from a variety of approaches and employ interpretive judgement. Yin (1994) suggests that although case studies do not attempt statistical generalisation, the resulting analytic generalisation can illustrate, represent, or generalise a theory. Stake (1995) describes the generalisability of case studies as 'naturalistic', resonating with the experience of actors themselves. Case study findings can thus place stakeholders at the centre of developing action-oriented insights for analysis, facilitating a greater, more immediate and relevant understanding of the phenomenon in question. In particular, the plurality of approaches employed forces the element of judgement explicit, avoiding the tendency, in quantitative studies, to bury it within the conclusions.

Consequently, the case study approach can be particularly valuable in researching organic agriculture, especially where there is interest in the socio-economic consequences of its particular approaches to natural resource use and management. For example, understanding the recent rapid growth of organic farming in Europe requires a wide range of issues to be taken into account. These include changes in consumer attitudes and behaviour, which have been strongly influenced by the print and broadcast media; the technical (especially environmental) difficulties which cause concern in conventional farming, where change in scientific understanding has played a role, although not uncontroversially; and the evolution of political support stemming from a variety of pressures including international trade liberalisation and the continuity

Peter Midmore, School of Management and Business,
The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK-SY23 3DD
Susanne Padel, Institute of Rural Sciences The University of
Wales, Aberystwyth, UK-SY23 3AL.
Markus Schermer, Center for Mountain Agriculture
University of Innsbruck, AT-6020

strength of farming lobbies so that support is gradually redistributed from a common framework of commodity-related payments to a regional system of environmental and rural development incentives. Clearly, attempts to cope at a general level with the complexity of interaction of this range of influences leads to oversimplification, and any universal insights derived will be invalid in all specific cases.

APPLICATION: THE IMPACT OF ORGANIC MARKETING INITIATIVES ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Drawing on the approach developed by Midmore et al. (2005), this section sets out the major elements which constitute a robust case study approach. In sequence, these comprise definition of the central issue, selection of comparative case studies which provide illustrations of it, acquisition and organisation of a sufficiently wide and consistent range of information (both quantitative and qualitative) to generate an holistic portrayal of each case, development of a narrative which allows themes and patterns to emerge, comparison between the findings of each case, and an interpretive analysis.

The central issue investigated was the contribution which marketing of organic products could make to rural development, particularly in peripheral, less favoured regions. Five case study initiatives in four regions were selected from a wider group across Europe which had previously been studied for factors contributing to economic and environmental performance. Examining overlapping layers of influences in greater depth allowed impacts on rural development (both in 'hard' terms of income and employment and 'soft' factors like culture, identity, confidence) to be assessed. Selection involved a range of criteria, including size and location, key commodities, and degree of integration with local and regional rural development institutions.

The case study process involved both local teams and researchers from other countries, working in an interlocking pattern to ensure consistency of approach. Local teams carried out desk research prior to fieldwork, using a set of guidance on geographic, demographic social and economic themes, constituting most of the quantitative data but also involving judgement and interpretation of qualitative documentary sources. Background information was assembled under the guidance of an Advisory Committee able to provide access to contacts, information and advice to help in the fieldwork phase of the case study research, and contributing as primary interviewees in the fieldwork phase, providing the main qualitative data. Other respondents were selected on the basis of a stakeholder analysis and grouped according to their extent of their involvement, and "snowballing" was used to determine links into other networks. Fieldwork guidelines included advice on what actors should be approached for interview as well as a semi-structured interview guide with model questions covering general relevant themes. Interviews were planned to extend over a maximum of ninety minutes, encouraging free responses to issues raised in suggested questions, and also any

other topics emerging from their own perspective. The aim was to encourage the identification and understanding of the role of internal and external actors and factors that shaped and reshaped the case study initiative, and how the initiative, in turn, acted as an agent of change within its own network. To explore the complex nature of the multidimensional relations within the rural development process, the network provides a unifying concept.

Actor Network Theory (see Latour, 1999) was used to explore interdependence between different initiatives and regional actors in rural development processes. The main process analysed is the growth and extension of spheres of influence and power, through "processes of translation", which follow four stages: an actor analysing a situation, defining the problem and proposing a solution; other actors becoming interested in the solution proposed and changing their affiliation to a group in favour of the new actor; the solution becoming accepted as a new concept and a new network of interests generated; and finally, the new network operating to implement the proposed solution.

DISCUSSION

The case study approach illustrated here shows how, and more importantly why, the marketing initiatives examined contribute to the process of rural economic development. Our experience suggests that comparative case studies require substantial effort in preparation and analysis and if carried out across countries, different languages provide a further complicating factor. However, the results provide valuable support to understanding the interaction between two distinct strands of European Union policy: sustainable agriculture and rural development. It provided a valuable tool for development of organic farming measures, extending support for conversion and a common certification structure for products to introduce more coordinated support for marketing in the 2007-2013 programming period.

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