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1. Introduction

In Italy, organic agriculture occupies more than one million of hectares (2003) of cultivated land. Organic producers were, in 2003, more than 40.000.

In our country a few studies exist about the figure of organic producers. Much more attention was paid to consumers and to marketing and economic sector, nevertheless some interesting analysis were reported about organic producers at a national or regional level.

Brunori & Di Iacovo (1993) classified the organic producers in first and second generation; in their classification the "first generation" producers chose to go into organics to experiment an alternative production model where production factors were available within the farm, and a growing attention was starting to be paid at environmental issues. At the same time, this type of producers were interested in building with their own work a production model in a more sustainable and natural way. The second generation, is, for the authors, essentially composed of producers which decided to switch from conventional to organics but without a real persuasion of its principles, just to follow a new market.


However that may be, organic producers seem to be more educated than conventional farmers, and most of them moved from urban areas to follow another model, perceived by them commonly as an "alternative" life model.

Another sociological study was conducted by Lucia Piani (1993) starting from the economic analysis of organic farms balance sheets from Friuli region (Northeastern Italy). She classified organic producers in three main categories: the "traditional" producers, the "intellectual" producers, and the "pragmatic" producers. According to the author, farmers from the first category have not really chosen to be organic producers, they become so for their connection to land and because they were always 'organic' without even know it. Their farms generally reach moderate revenues but their products are of high quality, but most of them are for self-consumption. In the second group, farmers come from rural areas but have experience in environmental or solidarity associations and decided to work in organic agriculture mostly for ideological reasons. Most of them are part-time farmers and have small farms; their work contributes to land and environment protection. The third category is formed by producers who, from the beginning, looked at the economic aspect of organic production. It is an heterogeneous group, formed by different people, such as farmers' children coming from conventional sector, entrepreneurs and so on.

In a qualitative research carried out in southern Italy, Scardigno (2001) and Pugliese (2001) recognized almost the same categories shared by most authors and reported above. Also, they pointed out an additional category to the general ones: they added the "eco-sly", meaning with that a group of producers interested only in EU subsidies, non professional in its activity, but who could possibly be persuaded of changing its consideration about organic production.

Concerning organic producers characteristics, in Tuscany a regional study conducted by ARSIA (1992) shows that average age of organic producers in the region is 42 years old, and that 15,2% of organic producers come from foreign countries. As well, many organic producers come from other professional sectors and decided to invest their money in agricultural activities.

From a similar research in Umbria region (Chiorri, 1993), organic farmers appear to have a university degree but not in agricultural sciences or related (23,5% of regional organic producers) while almost 40% of the others have a high school diploma. This data suggests,

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according to the author, that organic producers are motivated by personal ethic values and not by technical considerations.

Several sources indicate that the average age of organic producers is quite low compared with conventional producers; the majority of organic farmers are under 45 years old.

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1.1 Places and participants of the focus groups

Four groups were held in Italy, a pre-test with AIAB staff and one researcher and three groups, two of which with producers. Groups were one with old converted producers, held in Rome with participants from Rome province and surroundings, on November the 2nd 2004; one with newly converted producers held in Tuscany with local people, on November the 25th; one with policy makers, held in Rome on December the 13th. The pre-test was ran at AIAB with some local staff and one researcher from a National Research Institute of Plant Nutrition, on August the 23rd.

In the groups participants had the following characteristics (table 1):


Group	Date, place	Position in organic organisation	Full time producer	Age
Early converted	02/11/2004, Rome	Only one was a member of a certification board on livestock	All full time producers	Range 32-50
Recently converted	25/11/2004, Pisa	None of them	All full time producers	Range 32-48
Policy makers	13/12/2004, Rome	Almost all of them, except one researcher	One of them was a part-time producer as well	Range 37-66

Table 1: Summary of participants in the Focus Groups in Italy

The first producers' group was done mainly with organic producers from Lazio region whom have converted into organics from 1990 to at least 4 years ago. There were cattle and pig farmers, horticultural and fruit producers, olive tree and oil producers. Total number of participants was 6 people.

The second group with producers was held in Tuscany with a group of 9 people. All of them were only recently involved in organic production and half of them only recently got involved in agricultural production in general. There were two cereal producers with some cattle and large farms whom have converted this year, one cereal and bread/ pasta producer (medium farm), a married couple of vegetable producers and processors with a small farm, two aromatic herbs and honey producers (small farm), one extensive beef cattle breeder, one horticulture producer.

The third group was held in Rome with a small group of policy makers. Participants were four, being one agronomist from the Rome Trade Chamber and who collaborates with the Ministry of Agriculture in the Organic Department; one researcher of plant pathology involved in organic research and President of the National Organic Commission; one agronomist collaborating with the Mediterranean Institute of Agriculture on organic research (IAMB); one agronomist working for the Experimental Institute of Agricultural Mechanization (ISMA), dealing with machines for soil tillage and cultivation in conventional and organic systems.

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2. Results following discussion guide

2.1 Introduction

Nothing in particular to say under this subsection, but perhaps we could mention that there was a common interest of all participants about the Organic Revision project and his fulfilments; they asked a lot about the activities and future perspectives.

The main concern of producers was to be taken under consideration when deciding legislative framework and policies regarding organic production, distribution and processing. They felt not to be well represented by category associations or unions, so they thought that the focus groups were their chance to let their voices to be heard.

The policy makers were interested in the follow up of the project and the possible consequences on the EU Regulation.

2.2 *First association with organic during the Warm-up*

Starting from the ideas and concepts expressed by all groups participants, the following topics were the most shared:

- **Food quality** – in its wider sense; into this concept people from different groups included in first place healthiness (meaning *safety* and *high nutritional content*) both for producers and consumers, followed by *freshness*, *taste* and *being typical* (strict connection to production area).

Interesting to note that for a newly converted beef cattle producer, the term “quality” should be considered depending on consumers’ taste and preference, and that organic products quality (characteristics) is completely different so consumers should be educated in order to appreciate it properly. For the policy makers group, instead, the definition of “quality” should be a good compromise between producers and consumers points of view or expectations, and should be identified by measurable characteristics.


- **Environment protection** – under this concept it could be included caring for natural resources conservation, biodiversity, land protection and management, pollution reduction, energy saving.

All producers groups agreed that into their work it should be somehow included the adjoin value coming from their environmental protection activity (perhaps communicating this idea more clearly to the organic consumers). A researcher from the pre-test also mentioned the concept of landscape beauty related to the environmental role of organic farming.

For the aromatic plants producer (recently converted), organic farming is “the only sustainable system”. In the policy makers group the idea of sustainability was also associated to reduced energy consumption.

Another interesting point about land management was raised by the agronomist from the trade chamber, about part-time agriculture: in our country is easy to find many small farms which produce only for own consumption and are organic; they don’t affect the market but at the same time they do play an important role in land management with their activity.

Other topics and associations mentioned during this section only by some groups were:

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- **Freedom** (said by early converted producers) – meaning with this a more active role of the producer, a personal satisfaction found in his/her independency, a challenge.
- **Trust / reliability** (said by early and newly converted producers) – somehow this concept was associated with a direct relationship between farmer and consumer (said by both types of producers) or also to the abstract idea of equilibrium and harmony (mentioned by the early converted producers).

The **typical organic farm** or **farmer** was described sometimes in different ways by different groups but with points in common.

Similarities about the farmer are that he/she is or should be *intelligent, acculturate, flexible* to react to problems or setbacks, as reported by all participants.

Different views instead were:

- organic farmer has a *more long-term view of his/her activity and consequences* on the environment (said in the pre-test and in the policy makers group);
- typical organic farm is *more biodiverse* than conventional ones (said by the pre-test participants); is *more deeply integrated into the environment* (said by an old converted horticulture producer) and also is "a fundamental part of the global life cycle, far beyond the mere agricultural sector; it reaches a more natural equilibrium with nature, people, landscape" (said by the extensive cattle farmer, old producer).

2.3 The own organic history

Trying to synthesize motives behind the decision of working in the organic sector at different levels, it is possible to say that the principal reason cited by nearly all participants was their concern about environment. Everybody agreed that they should be directly involved in its conservation and improvement.


Also, a common perspective for most participants was considering the organic system a sort of natural evolution of agriculture, the only future and sustainable method of production.

Then, a main difference could be observed between groups of producers and non-producers. Producers were obviously more directly involved in land management and use of treatments, so they seemed guided by this acknowledgement.

Another difference was clear between early and recently converted producers: first ones had a family history or a tradition behind their choices which seem to have influenced them; newly converted producers came from many different backgrounds, often not related to agriculture.

Interesting token was given by a recently converted horticulture producer who said "I felt guilty of giving my products to people, when I knew they were treated with toxic substances" and so decided to convert into the organic system.

Non-producers had variegated motives for working in the organic sector. There were people that only accidentally got involved in organic research, some which decided to dedicate to OF to do something new, to find "an alternative model, not only for agriculture", as said by one researcher during the pre-test.

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2.4 Discussion of meaning of collected values

The two more mentioned values, agreed by all participants from the groups, was the concern about environment protection and management, and human and food healthiness/quality.

Other values were differently mentioned by the groups.

A social and ethic value of an alternative production model or alternative life model was discussed in the pre-test by non-producers. It was considered very important by all, especially by the soil researcher who said: "I feel that the fundamental value of organic farming is its suggestion of a different life model that involves not only the agricultural sector".

This ethic value was shared also by the cereal and pasta producer, a recently converted farmer.

For the early converted producers, another important value was considered to be their own self-satisfaction, achieving the goal of producing good quality products without relying on pesticides and chemicals.

Also, from the same group emerged the value of animal welfare, mentioned by the two cattle farmers who had different views on livestock housing.

2.5 Value conflicts and priorities

Speaking in general, it is possible to say that conflict areas were mainly seen outside the organic production sector and not really in the basic values.


The only two exceptions to this statement are the conflict between agricultural production and environment conservation (said by non-producers in the pre-test, by old organic producers, and by policy makers) and also the livestock housing conflict, regarding animal welfare vs. high productivity (mentioned only in the early converted producers group by the two cattle farmers).

Conflicts found outside OF were basically commercialisation problems, market expectation, difficulties for consumers' perception and education, low income.

These problems were mentioned by all producers and non-producers participants, with slightly different emphasis.

2.6 What values will be important in the future

Future views were possibly the more diverse topics through all the topics covered in the discussion groups.

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A common point that was raised by all non-producers and producers was the necessity that in the future the organic chain should create a deeper and direct connection between producers and consumers.

This consideration regards the value of trust/reliability but it could be transversal to more collected values: if consumers could be informed about food quality and environment conservation and protection, they would certainly appreciate more organic products global value.

For the recently converted producers the main value that will count in the future is environment protection. Also food quality is important but it could be seen as a consequence of the previous value.


All of them hoped that also an ethic and social value could be carried by the organic sector (position that was shared by the non-producers from the pre-test and by early converted producers as well).

An original view was presented by the plant pathologist from the policy makers group, who said that “possibly conventional agriculture will tend to merge into the organic system because it is the natural evolution of agriculture and because of the increasing interest and concern of people about environmental issues”.

For another researcher from the same group in the future the values of food healthiness, quality and being *typical* will assume more and more importance.

2.7 Closing remark

Nothing in particular to remark from the discussions.

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3. Results of structured questionnaire (IFOAM Principles)

Principle	Average score
1. Organic Agriculture should maintain and enhance health as an indivisible connection between human, animal, plant and soil	1.54
2. Organic food systems should emulate and benefit from nature's systems and cycles, fit into them and help sustain them.	1.46
3. Organic agriculture should strive to provide ecological justice to all concerned and ensure fair and transparent opportunities for livelihood	1.85
4. Organic agriculture should adopt only technologies that take precautionary measures to protect human health and the environment.	1.23
5. Organic agriculture should raise/ keep domesticated animals in a way that maintains and promotes their health, respects their natural behavior, and does not cause undue stress, pain or suffering.	1.23
6. Organic Agriculture should secure and enhance soil fertility	1.23
Other suggested principles	
A. <u>Producer centrality</u> : OA should leave the central role to the producer, relying on his/her decision-making capacities	
B. <u>Ethical principle</u> : OA should support small producers and distribution	
C. <u>Social (civic?) education</u>	
D. <u>Moral principle</u>	


4. Key results following core values as coded

1. Values related to the principle of health

The main values related to the principle of health that were covered in the Italian focus groups were concern about the own health of the farmers, production quality and ecosystems health, whereas but the family health did not appear important and the discussion on the cycle of health was limited.

Food quality was intensively discussed in all group, as was the consumer health.

When participants were asked to associate concepts and terms to the word "organic", one of the issues mentioned was health. This was said either in general or in one or more specific cases, such as food safety, food or product quality (the most mentioned), health of the environment, consumer health, my own health. There were no big differences between the groups in first associations related to health.

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1.1 Own health

Conventional agriculture practices often put in danger farmers health, and organic farmers seem to be aware of that, especially early converted producers. Producers made reference to their own health in the context of the quality, environment, and the health of others using the countryside such as jogging in the field.

One established producer referred to personal health problems as a trigger for change.

“Another thing that made me reflect a lot it’s that I got a digestive system disease, and in my opinion it depends probably on something hideous I have eaten. It is something I’ve experienced directly and so... I saw my neighbor putting pesticides on his vegetables, and he died of leukemia very quickly. At that point I decided. These are things that make you think a lot. (E, f) ”

The concern about own health in general was not discussed as a separate issue, but included in the general value of health and environment protection.

None of the policy makers, however, mentioned this problem in detail but they considered important the value of health in general.

1.2 Food quality and consumer health

The subject of food quality was certainly one of the most intensively debated ones in all groups in Italy


Farmers, policy makers and researchers considered this topic one of the most important values related to organic agriculture, together with environment conservation and saw it as closely related to the topic of health.

“Organic should also be giving the chance to the consumer to choose the healthiest food (R, m)”

Nevertheless, under the general term “quality” everyone included many different meanings and concerns, which in a way contributed to form a very wide significance of the “quality” concept, including such as food safety. Eating organic food was also considered pleasant experience compared with conventional, and needing fewer ingredients such as salt to bring out the taste. Organic products are considered of to be of high quality in terms of taste, organoleptic characteristics, and nutritional content.

“Today, we organic farmers are able to obtain results, our products can stand the comparison with conventional products, in competitions, in contests; we now obtain very high quality levels on wine, olive oil, cheese, and this happens not only in specific organic products competitions but in conventional ones, e we also win them! So the challenge [of quality] is won (E, m).”

Other dimensions that were covered under production quality include the link to soil and environment, food safety, and the absence of contamination. This concept partially overlaps with the section 4.1 – *Avoid residues*.

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“[It’s about] food safety more than quality, because [organic] beef meat I think became a little bit worse in terms of quality, but on safety not, this is recognized also by my clients (C, m)”

For some participants food quality also included certification, the fact that products are controlled and guaranteed for consumers, the personal relationship between producer and consumer, the direct relationship that builds trust. A further aspect related to this is authenticity, a link to regions or areas of production, what it’s called in Italy “typicality” of products. For some participants both among farmers and policy makers, this aspect is important while talking about food quality and linking food quality to the environment.

A couple of policy makers also pointed out the importance of getting a common and agreed concept of food quality between different stakeholders, in order to be able to properly communicate the benefits of organic food.

Directly related to the food quality appeared to be the expression of a concern of consumer health. This value was very frequently mentioned in a direct way. All farmers, either recently converted or not, do care about their contribution to consumers welfare and health, and this seems a deep concern for many producers, who feel responsible for what people eat. Also some policy maker mentioned this topic.

“I come from chemicals, I wanted to change because from one side I felt a bit guilty while selling my products at the market, because I knew what pesticide I have put there, I knew what was written behind

1.3 Ecosystem health

While discussing about values and meanings behind organic production, the second most mentioned topic was environmental concern, in terms of its conservation, of keeping it safe, sane, non-contaminated, etc.

This issue was largely associated with the innovative cultivation method that organic farming is proposing and which actively contributes to the maintenance of a healthy environment.

This consideration was stated by every group with no exceptions, from producers to policy makers.

“If we could stop throwing pesticides in the field we hope to recover the environment; maybe not for us but for those who shall come afterwards... for the world to go ahead (C, m)”


Some associated the idea of ecosystem health with the absence of residues and purity.

“When I think about “typicality” of a product, I have to link the product with environment, and the environment must be pure, uncontaminated (P, m)”

The aspect of environment conservation was also discussed but was coded under the next point (“Ecological integrity”).

1.4 Health cycle

Just a few participants mentioned explicitly this topic while talking about organic farming and health. Curiously, it was one person of each group.

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“Environment sustainability has to do with [human] health, because if you preserve the environment automatically you also sustain health (E, m)”

“We should give contributes to organic farming because we shall have less pollution, less admissions in hospitals, less diseases or illness, we shall have a cleaner world: this justify the subsidy (P, m)”

1.5 Conflicts related to the principle of “health”

The participants only perceived one conflict between organic values in this area that was related to plant protection problems. Referring to the end of the permission to use copper, participants saw a need for the development of new products that should be admissible and at the same time, effective, but that should not be dangerous for environment or people (*“technical problems are so many! Next year if there is a season like this one, without copper, what should I do?”* (E, m)).

The main conflict in relation to society at large was that putting organic farming rules into practice organic farming rules could conflict with farm incomes.

“At the end of the year I have to count on an income, otherwise I should be a missionary! So we should try to make it in the best possible way, where the aim is to achieve something, the farm, not only income. If I focus only on income, probably I will have to contrast with organic farming principles and methods (E, m)”

1.6 Other values in Health – Consumers


In summary, values related to the principle of health were discussed by participants in Italy referred to the farmers' own health, food quality and the health of the ecosystem. Of particular importance appeared to be the value of food quality, where the discussions illustrated a wide range of meanings to different participants. Within the group, the concept of food quality was mainly related to nutritional content and organoleptic quality for the group of policy makers and researchers, while for producers (both experienced and recently converted) the aspect of safety and non contaminated food was predominant, with little exceptions. The main conflict was seen between farm income and putting organic rules that guarantee food quality into practise.

2. Values related to the principle of ecological integrity

Under the principle of ecological integrity we included many values regarding nature's cycles, sustainability in terms of energy saving, biodiversity conservation and others.

Environment protection was located here, although there is some overlap with the value of ecosystem health, under the section 1.4., so some points raised in the discussion were coded under that code.

The topic was quite often covered in the discussion, although less frequently than other topics, such as food quality.

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“[Organic farming] is the only human activity consistent with the possibility of preserving and recovering the environment in which we’re living. If we don’t take this path, there’s no future (C, m)”

Many producers agreed with the fact this should be a strong and important value for organic food production and that this has to be communicated to consumers, in order to make the difference to their choices.

Environment protection is also considered a public good, a service for the whole community, either local or national. For the contribution to saving energy, preserving the environment, maintaining bio-diversity, preserving certain habitats and maintain the countryside for future generations, organic farming should be recognized as effective and should be sustained by government or the EU. This idea was also shared by researchers and policy makers.

“That is why our strength is that we do not burden society with costs for land recovery and preservation (C, m)”

When asked for associations, many participants from every group associated organic to some word dealing with ecological integrity (“*Energy (R, m)*”); “*Something that respects natural cycles (E, m)*”; “*Naturalness and environment (P, m)*”).

2.1 Recycling and energy saving

The issue of recycling was mentioned only once, by one researcher of the last group.

“[Organic farming] allows to easily re-use all by-products, to recycle, recovery, and recycling organic matter within the farm (R, m)”

Some participants considered that organic farming contributes to saving energy, thanks to reduced use of fossil fuel and of chemical inputs, which are produced with high energy consumption.


This thought was shared only by one researcher and a policy maker. No farmer said anything about this issue. However, saving energy appeared to be considered important for the participant who mentioned it.

“There are many inspiring principles of organic farming; one of those is energy because it concerns sustainable energy, so system energy, energy conservation and cost reduction (R, m)”

2.2 Mixed farming

Only one recently converted producer (a cattle farmer) made a statement including the topic of mixed farming in organic agriculture.

“I have never fertilized, I never considered organic fertilizers, only a good rotation, well performed. Manure. To me, being organic and grow extensive cereals must be done together with livestock production (C, m)”

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2.3 Genetic diversity, conservation and biodiversity

Within the area of ecological integrity, the issue of biodiversity was probably the most discussed by some participants. Nevertheless, it was treated rather superficially, not giving it a central role in the discussion of values, but more soundly, it was mentioned in a general context of environment protection.

There were no significant differences in groups of farmers or policy makers.

“We work respecting the environment, for preserving it, to reproduce biodiversity where we can (C, m)”

The issue of genetic diversity, in these specific terms, was not mentioned by any of the participants.

2.4 Landscape diversity

Only one experienced producer said something about landscape integration between his farm and the surrounding environment, touching quite indirectly the issue of landscape diversity.

“An organic farm is embedded in the environment, it is not organic farm and land, but it’s all land; once there were borders between woods and my farm, because I used to do an activity and the woods did another one. Now the farm is integrated in a context (E, m)”

2.5 Conflicts of “ecological integrity” to organic values and to societal values


Just a couple of participants mentioned the conflicting position of organic farming versus environment preservation, as a natural consequence of human activity. This happened even if organic farming was considered to be less harmful than conventional one.

“Every year we ruined a part of nature, from another side we preserve it; we’re doing a preserving agriculture (E, m)”

The conflicts to societal values were not discussed by any of the participants in this section.

2.6 Summary of main values discussion in relation to the principle of ecological integrity

In the area that refers to the principle of ecological integrity, of particular importance was the general concept of sustainability. When asked for specific meanings of the term, topics that were included in the concept were respect of natural cycles, environment protection, biodiversity conservation and energy saving. The most frequently mentioned by participants were environment protection/conservation and biodiversity conservation, while other issues were raised only by some policy makers (saving energy) or by single producers.

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3. Values related to the proposed principle of fairness (and livelihood)

This important topic was, in a predictable way, one of the most important and more frequently mentioned not only by producers but also by policy makers. Besides that, it could be said that assuring a good quality of life also to producers is considered a value. By far, in this area the most important aspect, shared by all groups and participants, was the concern about assuring a decent farm income to producers.

Only one person, from the groups of policy makers, associated livelihood values to organic farming when asked for spontaneous associations with the term "organic". (*"I say quality, sustainability and for sure remuneration (P, m)"*).

3.1 Diversification

Not directly mentioned by anyone, although it could be related to section number 2.3.

3.2 Costs for input

Some producer discussed about this point while encouraging new or recently converted producer for their scanty yields in the first year. This happened only in the recently converted producers group.

"To me, we should make a proportion: not how much I spent but how much did I save? (C, m)"

3.3 Securing farm income


By far, this is the topic that raised a major attention overall groups, either producers or policy makers, under the general area of fairness.

Everybody agreed on the fact that assuring a good remuneration for producers is an essential necessity, otherwise organic farming, like conventional farming, will tend to disappear.

"In order to spread over, organic farming needs not to be considered as a philosophy but as an economic resource, it's absolutely true (E, f)"

The ideas about how to assure this income, nevertheless, were quite different. Some producers, either experienced or newly converted, considered important to continue financing organic producers with subsidies, either from government or EU, mainly because of its role in environment protection. Someone said that the whole community benefits from the effects of organic farming, saving money for land recovery and preservation, because organic farmers with their work provides for it. Some policy makers agree with that.

"Organic farmers' income should be sustained, this is a duty; because organic farmers are asked not only to produce according to organic methods but also to preserve land in a certain way. (R, m)"

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Others, instead, did not like the idea of being helped so heavily, for a sort of professional pride, perhaps. Also, as long as they are financially sustained they feel not to have consideration or importance in market decision making, they feel dependent on others. This was mainly discussed amongst experienced producers, but also some recent organic farmer mentioned it.

3.4 Rural employment, Rural lifestyle, Have own land, Family farm

These 4 sections were not reported by anyone in Italy.

3.5 Conflicts of “livelihood” to organic values and to societal values

Trying to identify reasons why remuneration in organic farming is so low, different ideas were taken under consideration. Many producers think that the problem regards not only the organic sector but the activity of agriculture as a whole. This idea was especially sustained by recently converted producers.

“I always thought that organic farming was the only choice to come out of a situation where everybody earns but the producer. It was a hope. Now, sincerely, I doubt it (C, m)”

Another common point regarded many difficulties in distribution and commercialization, which is particularly true for the organic sector, less organized and structured, and with less access to big distribution chains.

In general, there were no references of organic sector values contrasting with assurance a major livelihood or fairness to producers.

3.6 Summary of main values discussion in relation to the principle of fairness


Overall, we could say that the issue of livelihood, of gaining a right remuneration for their work, is a fundamental problem, perceived by all producers and shared also by other organic stakeholders. Nevertheless, the problem is generally seen to be relying outside the narrow organic sector, with the exception of distribution problems, which is perceived as a weak link in the chain.

This probably means that assuring farm income and a good remuneration to organic producers is a condition *sine qua non* for spreading the organic sector and keeping it alive and competitive.

4. Principle of care

Within the value of environment protection and care, many particular aspects could be mentioned in detail. Generally speaking, the perception of farmers and policy makers about organic farming is still very much focused on avoiding chemicals and, also, on the feeling of taking care of the environment, as a belief.

Words coming out from spontaneous associations with the term organic, under this section, were related to the absence of pesticides or chemicals (“*not contaminated, residues-free (E, m)*”; “*clean (E, m)*”) or environment sustainability, as a consequence.

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4.1 Avoid residues

One frequently mentioned motive for choosing organic farming was the idea of refusing chemicals and any other dangerous substance that could damage the environment, or human and animal health. This concept was equally shared by early converted or recently converted producers and by policy makers and researchers as well.

“I come from chemicals, I wanted to change because from one side I felt a bit guilty while selling my products at the market, because I knew what pesticide I have put there, I knew what was written behind [the bottle], and I didn’t feel honest for this (C, m)”

For producers, cultivating without chemical inputs means also stopping the farm dependence on external inputs, and starting again to manage the farm freely, being a decision making manager.

4.2 Avoid GMOs

Although this is nowadays a much discussed point, only a couple of times it was brought into the discussion by farmers during the groups. And this only happened once in the new organic producers group, and another time in the policy makers group.

“To me the future is strictly correlated with what will be happening with GMOs, because it is important to do what must be done to keep intact the organic peculiarities (P, m)”

4.3 Taking care

This topic is for sure considered overall an important motive for sustaining organic farming and for conversion to organic farming. The beliefs in which organic producers recognized themselves are very much focused on preserving the environment for what seems a real concern about its future and a sincere caring feeling.


This argument was probably one of the most widely discussed during the groups in relation with fairness, with no significant differences among diverse groups.

“[Organic farming] is the only human activity consistent with the possibility of preserving and recovering the environment in which we’re living. If we don’t take this path, there’s no future (C, m)”

4.4 Conflicts between values related to “care” and other organic and societal values

Conflicts mentioned under this area were focused on the political situation on GMOs. Farmers feel that society, or government could cause them many problems by permitting GMOs to be cultivated.

“The game with GMOs is still open, still to be played; let just think that if investigation on them is allowed, in a few years they will tell us that there are no consequent effects... (C, m)”

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No conflicts were perceived amongst organic values and the principle of care.

4.5 Summary of points discussed related to the proposed principle of care

The area related to the “principle of care” was for sure considered an important value for organic farmers and policy makers in Italy.

Two points appeared to be of particular interest for the groups: the aspect of taking care of the environment (keeping it safe, maintaining it for future generations) and the possibility of reducing residues and pollution, for the same reason. These two aspects were widely discussed by both farmers’ groups, with no significant differences between experienced and recently converted producers, and also by policy makers and researchers, although with less emphasis.

The concern about GMOs was expressed by one producer of each group, but was not considered of central importance. One policy maker expressed it too.

5. Values related to animal health and welfare

Although representatives from cattle and livestock production were present in farmers groups, the topic of animal welfare was very few times mentioned by them in the discussion. The topic of animal health was not covered in Italy, and the only serious discussion on animal welfare took place at the very end of the discussion in the established producer group, by two women who are cattle farmers.

5.1 Animal welfare

As said in the introduction, this issue came up at the very end of the first producers group. Two women, both cattle farmers but with different livestock typology, presented their opposite points of view about the conflict between animal welfare and livestock housing.

“Animal welfare is important. It is not possible to keep animals tied with chains! (E, f)”

5.2 Conflicts of “animal welfare” to societal or organic values


The conflict mentioned by the two cattle farmers was between housing method and animal welfare, but also between housing and meat quality.

One, with an extensive farm, could not stand the idea of tying her animals, and assured that meat quality is still very high. The other, with a more intensive farm and an indoor housing method, didn’t agree, claiming that with the other method meat quality will decrease because a bigger amount of muscles and a reduced fat content will be present in animals.

No conflicts with societal values were referred by anyone in the groups.

5.3 Summary of values related to animal health and welfare

As cited above, the issue of animal health and welfare was not a central one in Italy. Recently converted producers and policy makers did not mentioned it in the discussion, while only two cattle farmers from the established producers’ group exchanged their different points of view, only at the end of the discussion.

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6. Principle of soil

The area of soil importance and its concerns was not very much discussed in the groups. It seems that its concept is somehow included in the more general issue of environment, and no particular interest seemed to rise from it.

In the association with the term “organic”, only one researcher from the last group mentioned organic matter as one of the concepts. He was the only one within all groups to do so.

6.1 Soil fertility

This topic was reported mainly by one producer, recently converted, and by one researcher who deals with soil in his work.

The first one stressed the point that soil is an important resource for farmers, and that conventional agriculture tends to destroy it, with neither no sense of future nor a good business management view.

“If you, year after year, slowly deteriorate soil, then are you doing a good thing in a short or medium-term? (C, m)”

The researcher, instead, insisted more on organic matter and its importance as a natural resource, not only for agriculture but also for land wealth.

6.2 Soil conservation

Same as above, the two considerations expressed about soil fertility had also implied concern about its sustainability in the long-term, as to say on soil conservation.

6.3 Conflicts related to the principle of “soil” to organic values or societal values

Any of the points were not discussed by any participant.

6.4 Summary of values related to the principle of “soil”


In Italy it seems that the value connected to land and soil is not very much perceived, neither by producers nor by policy makers and researchers. One exception was represented by one researcher who is dealing with soil in his work so he is probably more sensible to the issue.

Nevertheless when soil was mentioned was often in a future perspective, in terms of its conservation for future generations.

7. Nearness and local

The concern about having a more direct contact with local areas, and so with consumers and producers, and consequently getting some benefits, was expressed by many participants, regardless of group typology.

Main areas of discussion were both the introduction of short supply chains and the

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establishment of a trustworthy relationship between producers and consumers. The first aspect was cited by both kind of producers and by policy makers, while the second one was reported only in both producers groups'.

When asked for associations with the term "organic", the concept of trust was raised by a couple of participants, one from the established producers' group, one from the policy makers. This issue of "freshness", included under this area, was mentioned in the associations with the term "organic" by one experienced producer.

7.1 Short supply chains

The idea of getting to sell directly to consumers is one very common aim that many producers would like to reach. Mainly, this is because it could somehow assure to go over distribution problems, already mentioned. Also, because some of them recognized to organic products a closer link to territories than conventional food.

"I opened a small retail shop in my farm, I started to look for clients telling them 'listen, I have a good product' and trying to sell it at a low cost. [...] Retail sale satisfies me (C, m)"

Some of them, nevertheless, find also difficulties in realizing a direct selling chain, because it also depends on product typology and on farm location. For example, a cereal producer, recently converted, expressed his impossibility of selling directly to consumers because he is not involved in the flour production, nor in cattle breeding. Also, there is always the limit of having some farms not easily accessible to consumers because it could be located far from main towns or cities.

Another association was given by a policy maker:

"My purchased organic food should be produced locally, and be linked to the territory where I go (P, m)"

7.2 Trust


Another important value behind having a direct contact with consumers is the feeling of trust, which is established amongst producers and consumers.

"People together with the certificate want to see the producer face [...] having a direct relationship with the public, because the consumer who trusts you, makes you do a better job [...] I want people to be happy when eating my meat! (C, m)"

This relationship sometimes it's difficult to achieve, especially due to consumers misinformation and diffidence and to previous bad experiences. Nevertheless the issue of trustworthy relationships is considered fundamental by all producers, and was raised sometimes also by some policy maker.

7.3 Responsibility and care

Nothing in particular was mentioned under this topic, even if, in my opinion, when caring about environment protection and conservation many producers had in mind their local environment

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and area of production.

7.4 Conflicts to “nearness” to organic values and to societal values

Nothing was explicitly mentioned under this two topics.

7.5 Summary of values related to “nearness and local”

The value referring to the principle of “nearness and local” was expressed quite often by the groups, and was equally shared by both type of producers. It was either perceived as important by policy makers but by them was less discussed in detail.

The debate has focused mainly on two aspects: the importance of shortening the supply chains, in order to increase producers incomes and to assure freshness and quality, and the establishment of a direct connection between producers and consumers.

8. Holism and systems thinking

Sometimes organic farming is associated with an alternative way of production, or an alternative life model either, by producers. Under this area we could find values that are correlated with organic methods, especially when they are based on following an holistic approach in management.

This value was raised mainly by producers, either established and recently converted ones, although for experienced producers seemed to have a deeper importance.

Interestingly, during the first part of the discussion, with the associations with the term ‘organic’, some particularly inspired concepts came up. One of them was the issue of ‘harmony’, mentioned by a couple of participants from the experienced producers group.

“Difficulties, challenge; harmony; personal satisfaction (E, m)”

8.1 Thinking and managing the whole system


Many producers associated the idea of managing a living being while working in an organic farm, possibly because the organic system is much more complicated and must be globally managed. Also, organic farming practices for some are more similar to nature cycles, for its synergy and complexity.

This issue was mainly debated amongst producers, and not by policy makers. No particular difference was noticed in the approach by recently converted and experienced producers.

“Organic farming gives you the idea of a better balance in doing things, in producing them; in a way, what you’re doing makes sense, it’s a cycle, it’s a balanced production, part of something wider (E, f)”

8.2 Learning from nature

Some producers agreed that their way of producing is somehow an imitation of what nature does normally. Not precisely the same process, but for sure nature it’s considered inspiring

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while managing an organic farm.

“Actually, we collaborate with nature, as to say, cultivating lettuce is a different cycle but doing it organically it is a new cycle, very similar to what nature does (E, m)”

8.3 Harmony

Harmony was mentioned only in first associations by one experienced producer (see introduction of point 8).

8.4 Conflicts of “holism” to organic values and to societal values

No issues related to these two topics were discussed during groups’ sessions.

8.5 Summary of values related to “holism”

This area was not a central issue in the discussion in Italy. Within the topics here included, the most debated ones were the holistic management of the farm and, secondarily, the concept of harmony and of nature’s inspiration related to the organic farming method. All these aspects appeared to be sufficiently important for producers, and not equally considered by policy makers.

9. Area professional pride

A relevant time of the discussion was dedicated to this point, especially by the two groups of farmers. The debate has concentrated on the requested professional specialisation by the organic cultivation method, which seems to be perceived as more challenging for producers, both in positive and negative ways.


For experienced organic producers this aspect is probably one of the motives cited for conversion; they all agreed that difficulties they encounter are balanced by a personal satisfaction in achieving what they want, which is having good results without chemical inputs.

Also in the group of policy makers someone recognised this added value to the producer in the organic farm.

A couple of producers from the group of experienced farmers mentioned some words related to this area in the associations with the word “organic”.

“First thing that comes to my mind is ‘difficulty’; if we want to be pessimistic we call it like that; if we want to be optimistic, we call it ‘challenge’ (E, m)”

The second one mentioned the term “freedom” in relation to organic.

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9.1 Good husbandry

No explicit reference to this topic was mentioned in the debate.

9.2 Professional specialisation

Around this topic, many important discussions were focused.

First of all, many producers recognized the importance of a major professional capacity to face and solve problems that in organic farming are more likely to be found rather than in conventional agriculture.

More than one producer expressed the idea that conventional agriculture has narrowed farmers' capacity to face problems, reducing them to be dependent on external inputs and on counselling. Organic farming has allowed them to retrieve their professional knowledge, and this was cited as a motive for conversion for some producers, or at least as a motive for personal satisfaction for others.

“When you decide to be an organic farmer you have to change mentality, it’s not only a matter of changing practices. You change your job, you’re not narrowed to the field (C, m)”

This thought was shared also by some policy makers and researchers, who recognised the important role of manager, or entrepreneur to organic farmers, rather than consider them as simple executors of a technology studied elsewhere.

9.3 Flexibility and freedom

For some producers and policy makers, the organic farmer has to own a more flexible mentality, in order to be able to respond to different situations and hazards. Conventional farmers, instead, are seen as more schematic, rigid and with no cleverness.

“If he’s not flexible it’s difficult to change way of working; [conventional farmers] are reluctant to experiment alternative solutions, to change habits (P, m)”

Also, the concept of freedom was mentioned, especially by one producer, meaning with that the capacity of doing what he thinks it’s right, with no constrictions.

“I didn’t want to do what my father used to do; I started to be interested in organics just because I wanted freedom of choice (E, m)”

9.4 Efficiency of production


No issues raised under this section.

9.5 Conflicts “professionalism” to other organic values

Not mentioned by anybody.

9.6 Conflicts to “professionalism” to societal values

The only problem arose in this area could be the difficulty in following all the bureaucracy

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required by the organic system and certification, sometimes seen as an obstacle.

“There are so many documents to be filled that arrive night and day! Derogation regime on this, on that, and then if I want to cultivate a local onion variety from my village, I can’t, because it is not on the National Registry! (C, m)”

9.7 Summary of values related to “professional pride”

The value related to the concept of professional pride was certainly important for producers. Amongst the groups, experienced producers seemed to be more deeply touched by this concept, and they often cited it as a motive for conversion and as a great positive value that keeps them satisfied with the organic method.

Also policy makers have noticed that organic farmers need to be more prepared and flexible to respond to different situations which could easily happen in organic agriculture.

10. Other personal and general values

We decided to include a couple of points which we consider quite important and that could not fit under any of the above topics or areas.

10.1 Lack of history/background

Some farmers lamented the lack of background in organic farming as it is only recently spread in the world. The meaning of this observation is related to what consumers think about organic farming, as if the lack of traditional background could undermine their trust in organics.


“I see this difference: behind the gross conventional farmer who brings his cart to the market there is always a history, whilst the organic farmer is not identified with anything; so the conventional farmer who probably brings contaminated products to market can rely on a stereotype – organic farmers can’t (E, m)”

10.2 Ethical motivation/value

Another interesting point that emerged from the discussion about personal motives for conversion is the ethical value; meaning with that a personal and moral belief that pursuing organic farming is ‘good’.

This issue was raised by two women, from the two groups of producers.

“I thought, ‘if I with my kind of farm don’t do organics, who does it?’ In other words, it’s just from a moral point of view that I said to myself ‘I have to do it’, because extensive cattle breeding is for its nature linked to nature (E, f)”

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5. Final conclusions

It is possible to make some general statements about the results from the focus groups summaries and coding.

The general impression is that there are three main values or areas which were considered important by all participants:

- food quality and health (safety)
- environment health and care
- livelihood.

Within the first issue, many detailed implications are included, starting from own health, consumers' health, and so on, arriving to food safety, avoiding residues and link to regional or local territory. In this area, there were no significant differences between groups, perhaps only some personal point of view which could differ from one person to another; but generally speaking, this point was considered fundamental by all participants.


It is important to mention that many discussions and ideas were raised by the term "quality" which seems very meaningful depending also on who is related to. Interesting was the idea about the possibility of finding measurable parameters of food quality in order to make it more comprehensible for consumers.

More or less the same kind of considerations could be attributed to the value of environment health/care (which sometimes overlaps). In this case, we could say that virtually there was no real difference amongst participants, also in terms of personal values or points of view. The concept that organic farming is fundamental for preserving the environment and land it's clear for all, and all of them agreed that this value should be strongly communicated to consumers.

Regarding the third value, 'livelihood', it is possible to affirm that it is a fundamental aspect either in farmers and policy makers. But to say if this has to be considered as a value, rather than a mere practical problem, it is difficult to assess. In our opinion, farmers did not expressed their financial concern as directly linked to organic farming; they were more likely complaining about an actual situation, that could also change in the future. They were not expecting livelihood to be included in the organic farming values.

Additional thinking over could be done on other minor areas, for their differences and peculiarities amongst participants.

The issues of soil and animal welfare were discussed only by very few participants. The first one, was mentioned only by two cattle farmers in the experienced farmers group, having opposite ideas. The second one was cited only by two persons in two different groups. It seems that these matters are of secondary importance for Italian farmers and stakeholders. Or maybe, they are somehow included in other bigger areas.

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Also, the area of professional pride was considered quite important by many participants, especially by the experienced group, which mentioned it from the beginning, including it in the associations and in the motives for their conversion to the organic sector.

Another aspect that was shared by all of them was the disappointment in finding out that consumers do not recognize their role and their value, so their efforts for doing “the right thing” seem worthless sometimes.

Values under the ecological integrity area were yet discussed, but for sure were not considered relevant as others.

Somebody focused on biodiversity, someone on energy consumption, but it was more a personal conviction moving these ideas than a typical characteristic. This is also demonstrated by the fact that there was not a clear connection between value importance and group category.

Last, but not least, the moral implications in organic farming were indicated by two women from two different producers groups, indicating perhaps that women could be more interested in ethical values also in their professional life.