

WG 2.6: Conventionalisation? Organic farming bites back!

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Summary of discussions

1st Session: The organic-conventional relationship

There are a range of alternative agricultures that compete with organic farming (for farmers, consumers and policy support), e.g. agro-ecology, fair trade, eco-labels (food miles, carbon foot print), local food, origin labels (PDO, PGI), industry standards (GlobalGAP). This diversity is not least influenced by regional conditions (soils (e.g., composition, slope), predominant animal housing systems (path dependency), density of organic farms in the region, availability of local markets, necessity to integrate trees, etc.

For farmers: option of low-input farming, i.e. ‘almost organic anyway’ or ‘green conventional’ as a way to avoid the cost-price squeeze and close nutrient cycles to avoid ‘fodder miles’.. many benefits do not require organic certification. For policy makers and consumers: other labels might be ‘good enough’.

Each of these production methods (and food ‘qualities’) change over time, and influence each other’s trajectories, as well as organic farming’s future trajectories.

We need to be aware that the term “conventionalisation”, while useful in every-day language, is not theoretically useful, as it is not internally coherent. There are different internal dynamics, different logics to different developments that are referred to as ‘conventionalisation’ (see publication by C. Rosin and H. Campbell, 2008 in J. of Rural Studies). Conventionalisation refers to a number of trends that are not necessarily related to one another, it is not one coherent dynamic. Rather, it is a layered phenomenon with different trajectories and a range of unrelated developments.

There is not ONE right trajectory for organics to evolve, there will be different qualities, different styles of production. We need to learn to capture this diversity. The inherent tension between a ‘systems redesign’ and a ‘compliance with standards’ approach to organic farming will remain; quantity vs. quality; volume vs. value.

Organic quality: mostly relates to conventional standards (appearance, nutritional content). Cf neoliberal discourse: quality must be auditable so as to be marketable = translated into prices. No organic-specific qualities, such as socio-economic criteria (e.g., fair trade, quality of life). Consumers believe (and are, cynically led to believe) that these criteria are part of organic production (see example of the UK: negotiations between fair trade and organic broke down in animosity 2-3 years ago). And what about fair prices for consumers? Is in opposition to premium branding! Interestingly: GlobalGAP does include social criteria (worker welfare, local cultural heritage, no child labour)

Role of industry, of retailers as drivers of change in organic production. Role of the language retailers use when promoting organics.

Need to be aware of an ‘Eden narrative’ that is often associated with organic farming: there was once purity in organic farming, but we now live in a fallen world. This narrative avoids the reality of needing to make compromises and to adapt. Organic farming (esp. the principles) can be seen as a utopia: what we aspire to be, even if we do not live up to it. This utopia is politically powerful!

Take a post-structuralist approach to studying the changes within organic farming: as an assemblage, a historical development, a temporary configuration. This approach shows that there is not necessarily a coherent system dynamic in organic farming. Rather made up of multiple contingencies. Might allow to better understand heterogeneity.

Just as organic farming was disruptive to the agricultural (modernist) discourse, so conventionalisation is disruptive of the organic farming discourse. Thus seen as a

provocation, a challenge to established wisdoms. Might explain why there is little discourse within the organic community about conventionalisation.

In the 1980s organic farming had a big influence on environmental certification, through having the knowledge of alternative production methods. But currently organic farming has lost touch with the current issues, it does not offer a solution to current problems. It seems organic farming is out of step with the time. Has it ossified? Is there a lock-in tendency? It seems to have lost its responsiveness (e.g. not tied to fair trade or local food). An example might be the rigidity of its certification system (very rigid compared to GlobalGAP, where the criteria that will be audited are reviewed every year by a technical committee).

We know very little about the 'almost organic' groups of farmers, esp. those who are not audited. Unclear if it is a group that will disappear (e.g. because it is not ideologically driven, e.g., made up of old, retiring farmers or hobby farmers), or if it is a group that will grow (as providers of local food).

2nd Session: Struggling with implementing the organic principles and values

Presentations showed good case studies illustrating the challenge:

- BE: Role of large producers in changing the standards of organic production: achieved a reduction of the min. age of chicken from 81 to 70 days, at least for a certain breed of chicken.
- CZ: Influence of regulations such as veterinary and hygienic requirements for eggs: must be sorted and perfectly clean, which requires expensive machinery and thus pushes towards larger producers to benefit from economies of scale (path dependency).
- ES: third party certification does not reward those farmers who go further, does not encourage local cohesion and knowledge exchange. In Spain certification cost depends on the number of products produced, thus penalises diversified farms. Committed farmers might have to build a dual system (such as Nature et Progrès in France)
- GE: Young farmers might be interested in organic farming, but it is difficult for them to find reliable information or opportunities for apprenticeships

Chicken production is the most industrialised animal production system in Europe, often vertically integrated. Very difficult for organic farmers to have other breeds that are more suited to organic production methods (most conventional hybrids are actually suffering when they are kept for 80 days). Interesting what arguments are used (and thus accepted as valid) when discussing a change in the organic standards (see example of BE). Animal welfare rarely invoked as a value per se, but often instrumentalised for other ends (leads to a better product, a better price).

Role of the government in influencing the trajectories of organic farming: can foster or stop a development, e.g. through procedures for changing standards, offering organic extension services, including organic farming in the curricula of vocational schools for farmers. The state has a large role on how the debate is staged. What role does the EU play in the homogenisation of organic farming? Various technologies of governance can be found (inclusion/exclusion of participatory processes). Pattern of institutionalisation is different in different states of the EU, some have a more consensual, others are more confrontational political traditions.

Organic farming was transformational at a global level (created production and consumption of environmentally friendly products). But it has not created a space for citizenship, mutuality, reciprocity, dialogue, democracy. In organic discourse: keep talking about consumers, not about citizens. A participative guarantee system (supported by IFOAM) requires engaged citizens. Regions are free to recognize this system as valid (just like the third party certification).

Limited role of organic farmer associations in supporting participation, or participative guarantee systems. Some may have much at stake and not be interested in a change (e.g.

some of the top officials have large farms, providing inputs for supermarkets... they may fear that they could loose in a change)

There has been some discussion of diffusion of innovation, but what generates innovation? Where are the people who will innovate and thus change organic farming? Change might come in waves. Those who brought about the change in the 1980s-90s might feel they have done enough. Where is the new 'rebels'? Does neoliberalism constrain our imaginations about how food systems could work? Local food movement seems to be more innovative than organic farming (which is more associated with big business!). Are farmers even interested in alternatives to the current developments in organic farming?

3rd Session: Development pathways: searching for alternatives

Representing pathways, with their potential "drivers": Diversification (in its various forms) vs specialisation; integration vs. striving towards autonomy (from input markets, and in processing, marketing). Clarifying the relationships between organic farming and sustainable agriculture (how organic farming and food contributes and what dimensions of sustainable agriculture challenge organic farming)

What is the goal of organic farming, what is it trying to achieve? How to measure its 'success'? 1% of consumers for 40 years of efforts, is that 'success'?

In the 1990s the organic movement has chosen consumerism as a strategy to advance its goals. Has been lifted by the neo-liberal wave and has benefited from it. It is now difficult to disentangle from this alliance. Drawback: now only address people as consumers. But if want to sell a product, it limits the communication compared to addressing people as citizens! Often assumed that only consumers (i.e. those who buy organic foods) have something to say about organic!?

Organic farming has no social identity, no social strategy. It does not speak to the citizen, it offers no answers to political issues of the day. Organic movement will need a shift in strategy if it wants to remain relevant.

Organic food is often said to be consumed for individualistic reasons (what's in it for me?) which follows the neoliberal discourse. This is challenged if individual benefits are contested. Some are purchasing organic foods to advance reasons/values created by the movement. These values are used for marketing and communication. There is often a deliberate confusion: advance values through consumption? More generally, development pathways can't be described as a linear process starting with individuals and ending up with movements, organisations or institutionalisation. Conversely, institutions can also support individual conversions.

Tesco sees organic as a pillar brand (similar for Sainsbury who uses organic for 'greening' its image). For many supermarkets, organic is a brand or a product, not a production system, not a quality. Need to be aware that those who control terms (e.g. defining organic as a 'brand') also controls the discourse. A 'brand' obscures all the processes of production. Sainsbury speaks of the 'halo effect': organic produces a glow that covers all the other products green.

Organic movement may need a new strategy to face the current feeling of urgency (cf. climate change, fear of ecological collapse in 10-15 years, thus need to do something now!). By introducing a time pressure, it changes the discourse.

The strength of 'conventionalisation', is that it provided a narrative that included the whole food chain, albeit "with an indefinite time frame"... We need another model to explain what is going on, a model that also includes the whole food system and takes time into consideration.

Thank you for the very stimulating discussions!!

Back to the future: Long-term trajectories in organic farms in the south of France

Stéphane Bellon, Stanislas Poudou and Natacha Sautereau *Ecodevelopment Unit, INRA Avignon, France*

Considering conventionalisation as a process, this work aims at characterizing the various evolutions patterns in organic farms. We assumed that the process, if present, should be visible at the time scale of a generation. Building on interviews conducted in the 1980s with early converters, we returned to the field and interviewed farmers on the same farmstead. The data was collected in the department of Drôme, South-Eastern France. The issue of conventionalisation is approached regarding autonomy (in terms of inputs and marketing outlets) and diversification (*versus* specialisation). Although we focused on technical changes at the farm level – i.e. choices and practices on crops, livestock, land and equipment – possible farm redesign were also addressed. Preliminary results show that farm trajectories differ significantly. Some of the farmers reproduced the mixed crop-livestock organic farming model, albeit with new equipment and market outlets, supported by networks and communication skills. In this case, autonomy is a key driver. Others followed regional production patterns in fruit production, with new technologies in orchard protection and diversification (crops or livestock). In another group, farmers appear highly adaptive, with major changes in terms of combination of activities, cultivated area, joint farming arrangements, and marketing. As a whole, change is on-going and farmers still have a range of projects. Over the time span of a generation, such changes cannot be reduced to conventionalisation. They also reveal internal capabilities and future directions for organic farming dynamics.

Organic matter management and self-sufficiency

André Blouet and Xavier Coquil *SAD-ASTER, INRA Mirecourt, France*

In the ruminant livestock farms, profitability speaks in favour of a strong fodder self-sufficiency. This self-sufficiency seems easier to reach if the mixed farming system is diversified. However this requirement of self-sufficiency leads to a large share of forage crops (e.g., ley, leguminous meadows with seeds) in cropping plans and consequently leaves little place for cereals in straw. However, the straw resource is crucial to insure comfortable bedding for animals, and also for producing solid manure, which is often preferred to the liquid manure in organic farming. Where winters are long (4-months and more), the straw resource is often insufficient to provide the animal bedding. Organic stockbreeders thus ask their conventional neighbours to supply them with the straw that they are lacking. On the organic farms this imported, conventional straw is then transformed into manure, which is essential to ensure the organic fertility of soils and useful for the mineral fertilization of the crops. As the organic regulations authorize the use of this "biological fertilizer" since it is composted, we understand why the straw coming from conventional farms rarely returns to them. Such a use of the straw compromises the organic fertility of the conventional farms and thus leads to an ethical criticism of the practices of the biological farmers: can they leave it to the conventional farmers to produce a part of the resources they need according to modalities that their own regulations forbid?

The European certification system: Promoting conventionalisation by penalizing deep organic approaches

Maria Carmen Cuéllar Padilla and Eduardo Sevilla Guzmán *Córdoba University, Spain*

The organic guarantee system established as compulsory in the EU is the third party certification, based on the annual examination of the farms by technical staff. In 2005, different organic groups of small and medium producers in Andalusia denounced some of the effects of this system. They reported that its structure of costs and bureaucracy was discouraging them to get officially certified, and pointed out that an alternative guarantee system was an urgently needed. We started a research project with these groups, analysing: a) the social dimension of the problems they were denouncing and of building an alternative guarantee system through a participatory process; b) the legal dimension, developing the options that this alternative system needed to have to be officially recognized; and c) the political dimension, analysing the participants' view of the organic production and the power relations they aimed to change. We present some of the results of this project, focusing on how the European organic certification system penalizes small and medium producers, especially those who conceive of organic production in a holistic and comprehensive way. We analyse the points of view of these producers, who decided to work on the construction of an alternative guarantee system, to show how the official certification system promotes the conventionalisation of the organic sector. Our results show that the current system ignores and penalizes the possible transformative potential of the organic sector. Following this assertion, we argue that participatory guarantee systems are an instrument to support alternative patterns in the organic sector.

Organic farmers searching for alternatives to conventionalisation

Ika Darnhofer *BOKU – Univ. of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Austria*

In the last 10 years there have been numerous publications on the 'conventionalisation' of organic farming. In many of these studies long marketing chains are identified as a key driver of conventionalisation. In these approaches the agency of farmers is often under-theorised. Farmers are pictured as passive and powerless, forced to comply with the demands of large processors and retailers. Some authors indicate that the only alternative is for organic farmers to engage in on-farm processing and direct marketing. However, this option is not open to all farmers as it is strongly dependent on the labour availability on-farm and the proximity of a consumer centre. Based on interviews and on discussions following presentations in front of farmers, I doubt that farmers are as powerless as they tend to be depicted by scientists. Either farmers are complicit, i.e. it suits them to streamline their farm, focus on the legal requirement for organic certification and sell to large retailers. Or the farmers are actively shaping their options, but in ways not captured by researchers. Indeed, organic farmers have several options to 'bite back': searching for an alternative individually, cooperating with neighbouring farms or becoming active in an association. The presentation will focus on approaches farmers have implemented to 'work around' the aspects of 'conventionalisation' that does not suit their understanding of organic farming, emphasizing the need to revalue the heterogeneity of farms.

Brazilian multifaceted ecologically-based agriculture: Between conventionalization and agroecological principles application

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In Brazil, recent legal changes have included several agricultural systems in the organic agriculture legislation, i.e., organic agriculture *per se*, biodynamic agriculture, permaculture, agroecology. However, some consider agroecology as being the umbrella for these ecological forms of agriculture, including organic agriculture. As a result, many initiatives were launched by various stakeholders: government institutions; research, training and extension organizations; NGOs or farmers groups. This debate illustrates the different interpretations of organic agriculture among farmers groups and researchers. Based on an analysis of documents (Brazilian congress proceedings and journal articles) as well as data from interviews, meetings and fairs, we analyse the current development of organic farming in Brazil. The conventionalization debate in Brazil is posed in specific terms, as organic agriculture is often interpreted as a method substituting conventional inputs and practices with alternative eligible practices. Other forms of agriculture are considered as genuine alternatives to conventional farming, i.e. based on redesigning farms and agroecosystems on the basis of new ecological processes. Organic agriculture is thus seen as favouring large scale producers, supermarkets (packaging enhancing visual quality of products) and export markets. As a whole, the discourse is not explicit in scientific publications, although the literature discussing the industrialization model of Brazilian agriculture is extensive. We conclude that in most cases research and field work does not address the development of organic agriculture in terms of conventionalisation, but as interpretations of organic agriculture and oppositions between alternative agricultural models.

Strengthening the organic farming development: From the conventionalisation debate to the sustainable perspective

Jean-Luc Favreau, Mohamed Gafsi, Bernard Mondy and Agnès Terrieux *UMR Dynamiques Rurales, ENFA, France*

The current debate about conventionalisation thesis of organic farming reminds us of the importance of values and principles which are behind this type of agriculture: the search for a coherence connecting agricultural production, ecological management, ethics, and public health. But to address the topic of conventionalisation through the general principles of organic farming and its founders' intentions might put us at risk of being restricted to a narrow framework and thus missing important points of the debate. To avoid this risk, we suggest using a notion whose principles and objectives are close to those of organic farming, yet more global: sustainability. Rather than creating new indicators to estimate the conventionalisation, we assess the sustainability of farms committed to different degrees in the process of conventionalisation and compare them to others, which are using pioneering organic farming methods. To do this, we built and used an indicator system adapted to the specificities of organic farming. Results show various forms of sustainability, closely related to the forms of entrepreneurial farms and the ways they mobilize economic, social or natural capitals. This is illustrated by case studies of farms of the Region Midi-Pyrenees, in south-west of France.

Organic farming: An exclusive concept?

Heidrun Moschitz *Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL), Switzerland*

Consuming organic products is often seen as part of political consumerism that may affect future society. It is thus relevant to reflect on who has the power to take part in, and who is excluded from such political action. Being a farming system which provides food mainly to the middle class of well-educated concerned consumers, organic agriculture could be seen as a highly exclusive concept. In the food supply chain, exclusion can work through the quality, the price and the location. All three ways seem possible for organic farming. First, it is a distinct quality, which, secondly, often is more expensive than conventionally produced food. In terms of location, organic products have become less and less exclusive during the past years as they are increasingly available in supermarkets. Organic shops or organic farmers' markets however remain exclusive shopping places that attract a specific clientele, not least of the above-mentioned 'well educated middle-class'. Exclusion can take both an economic and a cultural form. While being economically inactive (as e.g. unemployed) remains an important source of social exclusion, the cultural form becomes increasingly relevant. Thus, the organic sector attracts only a few consumers while many others do not feel affinity with its values and cultural identity. This contribution addresses the external effects of the value debate within the organic movement. It conceptualizes options for the organic sector to meet the argument of social exclusion without giving up its identity.

The end of organic consumerism: Strategic changes in the organic movement?

Matt Reed *Countryside and Community Research Institute, UK*

Whilst accounts in the popular media have focused on the impacts of the global recession on the sales of organic products, there has been an increased questioning of the entire strategy of the movement within the British organic movement. A number of movements, arguments and interventions have come together to question the validity of advancing the movement's aims through a consumerism. Concerns about 'peak oil' and climate change, embodied in the transition movement point to the need for a rapid transition to another modality of organic farming. Whilst campaigns about the public health impacts of a diet constructed and dominated by oligopolistic food retailers have debated the role of the state in the provision of adequate food. After nearly thirty-five years of using organic products as a 'strategic intervention in the market place' the fragility of the strategy has become increasingly apparent. Although deriving from different perspectives these critiques question the use of consumerism as a form of political participation. Viewing the organic movement through the lens of social movement theory this paper explores the tensions within the contemporary organic movement as it debates the limitations of cultural politics.

Converting to organic farming – Needs of eco-extension in Germany

Henrike Rieken and Hermann Boland *University of Gießen, Germany*

Currently the value of the organic food market in Germany is approximately 5.8 billion Euros and is rapidly growing. However, this growth is not reflected in the number of organic farmers. This imbalance results in a gap between supply and demand and in a high import quota. This is not in accordance with the principles of organic farming and is instead reminiscent of conventional agribusiness. A return to short-distance transport and local production would require more organic farmers in Germany. To facilitate this development, eco-extension is one key instrument. Currently eco-extension faces challenges with the

initial contact and acquisition of conventional farmers. But the diverse strategies within the agricultural extension sector of Germany (chambers of agriculture, government ministries, private individuals and organizations) and the limited importance of organic farming within conventional agriculture apprenticeship may hinder communication between farmers and eco-advisors. We thus focus on following questions: How to address conventional farmers and how to enhance their readiness to adopt the innovation of organic farming? We analyse how different actors assess the situation: apprentices, practicing farmers, and advisors. Moreover, it is of interest how the surrounding society (family, colleagues and villagers) – rather than government payments – influences the decision to convert or not to convert. We aim to develop a theory about farmer decision-making, taking into account the pre-decisional phases. Understanding farmer decision-making helps eco-extension to adapt its frameworks, particularly during the phase of initial contact.

Organification: *n.* the tendency to assume social and environmental orientations associated with organic production

Christopher Rosin and Hugh Campbell *CSAFE, University of Otago, New Zealand*

In an interrogation of the concept of the conventionalisation of organic agriculture, Rosin and Campbell (2009) utilised a Conventions Theory framework to reassess the development of New Zealand's organic sector. Based on this assessment, the authors argued that 'organic' – as a quality designation attached to (or a valuation of) agricultural products – was best understood as an emergent set of conventions. As such, contemporary definitions (or 'tests') of organic are active elements of temporally contingent coalescences of agreements that help to coordinate social interaction in the global food system. These tests are further subject to constant challenge by philosophically committed organic and conventional interest groups that occupy roles throughout the social relationships that define agriculture (from producer to consumer, scientist to salesperson). An important implication of this approach is the acknowledgment of the multifaceted influence of the organic designation throughout global agriculture, including its influence on 'conventional' commercial agriculture. In this paper, we use the example of audited best practice schemes (developed as an alternative quality designation to organic) in New Zealand to argue that conventional agriculture has, to some extent, been subject to organification. We argue that the insistence on documenting more acceptable social and environmental practice in 'non-organic' production is largely the result of consumers' growing awareness of the shortcomings of conventional agriculture which are most starkly evident in comparisons with idealised organic practice.

“Almost organic anyway”: Case studies of low input farming in the UK

Lee-Ann Sutherland *Macaulay Land Use Research Institute, UK*

This paper explores the meaning and implications of the descriptor 'almost organic anyway', as expressed by farmers in relation to organic conversion. Qualitative field research comparing organic and conventional farming cultures in England found a number of farmers who described themselves as 'almost organic anyway': operating extensive farming systems with few chemical inputs. Many of these farmers had no plans to undertake conversion, citing concerns about production standards, animal welfare, paperwork and the politics of the organic movement. Those who had converted identified the limited changes required to their systems as important motivators. The author explores the tissues underlying the 'almost organic anyway' descriptor, comparing conventional and organic farmer perceptions of organic farming practices, the economic and cultural contexts in which low input agriculture has emerged, and the degree to which conventional farmer responses to organic conversion subsidies differ from their responses to environmental subsidies. Findings suggest that widespread

misconceptions of organic farming techniques among conventional farmers augment long term cultural barriers to organic farm conversion. At the same time, perceived similarities in farming practices at small to medium scales suggest that current threats to maintaining organic farming standards come not only from commercialisation at large scale, but also from blurred distinctions at small and medium scales. Findings in this paper are drawn from the RELU funded SCALE (An Integrated Analysis of Scale Effects in Alternative Agricultural Systems) project

Belgian organic farmers' practices and perceptions between regulation, market and ethics

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This paper analyses the tensions between the regulation, the market constraints and the stakeholders' perceptions and practices in the Belgian organic food and farming sector. It is based on the ethnography of a case study: the re-negotiation of the Belgian regulation on organic chicken rearing. Certain aspects of the EU regulation on organic farming are left to the Member States to be defined, such as the age at which organic chickens are to be slaughtered. Unhappy with the market distorting effect of these variations in regulation, a faction of the organic chicken sector asked for a revision of the Belgian regulation. This revision occurred through an official dialogue with the organic farming movement and created a strong debate among stakeholders. Through a 14-months ethnographic fieldwork inside the Belgian organic farming movement, I describe the whole regulatory change process and consider the divergent opinion of the stakeholders involved: rearers, commodity chain managers, officials from governmental administration and organic farming organizations and unions. In doing this, I focus on the diversity of organic chicken rearers' practices, perceptions and motivations. I seek to understand how chicken rearers define their activity and how they build their self-identity by differentiating themselves from other farmers. I examine also how these perceptions and practices are embodied in the organic farming movement discourses. I explore, in particular, how various stakeholders build and use a common discourse of a sense of loss of ethics in organic agriculture and how this discourse is instrumentalised in the negotiations with opposed discourses.

Chicken à la organic: Case study on organic poultry production in the Czech Republic

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This work seeks to contribute to the discussion on the practical implementation of the organic values by exploring the situation in the Czech Republic. The empirical evidence is based on the explorative case study of organic poultry production ("bio eggs" and "bio chicken meat"). It is widely acknowledged that the current conventional poultry production is closely associated with industrial agricultural methods, which regularly result in various negative externalities. Altering this model, with regard to the transformative potential of the organic agriculture, therefore posits a clear challenge for contemporary organic farming. The goal of the study is to empirically investigate how this potential is implemented and to what extent results of the transformation meet the principles of sustainable food production. The case study tackles three inter-related questions: (1) what forms does the organic poultry production in the Czech Republic really take, (2) what factors shape these forms and (3) how do the particular realities contribute to sustainable food production and rural development. Results of the study contribute to the conventionalization debate by recognizing specific enabling/disabling factors of the organic food production and also by providing more nuanced perspective on contemporary organic sector, which challenges the limited focus of the conventionalization thesis.