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Social factors in the decision by Swiss farmers to convert to organic farming

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The number of organic farms in Switzerland has remained stable since 2009, although several studies have shown that financial arguments should mean that more farms convert to organic production. These results suggest that either farmers do not behave rationally, or there are other reasons that inhibit farmers from conversion. In this study, 39 organic and non-organic Swiss farmers were interviewed with the aim of identifying barriers to conversion and learning how these have been overcome. The results suggest that the structural conditions for conversion are in place but a range of social factors create barriers. These factors include negative attitudes towards organic farming held by family members; problems with mutual acceptance between organic and non-organic farmers; technical reasons such as fear of weed infestation; and a fear of losing independence. Organic farmers however suggested that these barriers are overestimated. Farmers who are considering conversion are reluctant to ask for advice because this is seen as an irreversible step to conversion. This allows the conclusion that informal events and platforms that enable communication between organic and non-organic farmers could inspire farmers to take the first steps.

Keywords: conversion, organic farming, barriers, enablers, motivations

1 Introduction

Although the proportion of organic farms increased, the actual number of organic farms in Switzerland remained relatively stable between 2002 (with 5897 farms: 8.75 % of all farms) and 2012 (with 5895 Farms:10.42 % of all farms), before rising slightly to 6047 organic farms (10.95 % of all farms) in 2013 (BfS, 2014). Sanders et al. (2011) conducted an economic evaluation and found that the income on organic farms was approximately 25 % higher than on comparable conventional farms. If financial considerations were the deciding factor in whether to convert, we could expect the number of conversions to organic farming to be considerably higher. In a Study by Ferjani et al. (2010), conventional farmers nominated fear of weed infestations, higher work demands, and increasing control requirements as barriers to conversion to organic farming. Studies by Khaledi et al. (2010), und Padel (2009) however found that conversion barriers cannot be removed by simply finding solutions to economic and technical problems, but rather that social norms, the social situation on the farm, personal values, and attitudes held by the farming family are likely to be dominant decision criteria. The goal of this study is to identify barriers for Swiss farmers to convert to organic farming and to learn how these barriers have been overcome by farming families that have successfully converted.

2 Material and Methods

A total of 24 interviews with farmers from the German speaking part of Switzerland, and 15 interviews with farmers from the French speaking part of Switzerland were conducted. Half of the interview partners were organic farmers; meaning they had converted to organic farming and been certified as organic producers by BioSuisse, which is the primary organic certifying body in Switzerland. The remaining farmers were certified by an organisation known as IP Suisse, which is an association of farmers who produce using environmentally and animal friendly production methods; including being GM free and with minimal use of

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synthetic pesticides. The interviews were transcribed and their content was coded and analysed. Based on this analysis, concrete recommendations for ways to reduce barriers to conversion are proposed.

3 Results

The responding farmers agreed that all necessary requirements are in place for conversion. They rated external factors, such as agricultural policy and the market, as being good, and they expressed a high degree of confidence in the support and the advice they receive. In addition to the economic conditions, which were expected to play an important role in the transition, many farmers reported that they first needed to make a change to organic in their own minds. To accompany the process of "mental conversion", it is important that conversion to organic agriculture means that the farmer remains within their individual value system: which can be generalised as their identity as a producer. On a general level, this is not a particularly difficult step to make because a large overlap was found between the identities of organic and non organic farmers. Both groups see themselves primarily as producers, and both groups place a high value on soil preservation and the long term viability of their farms.

A key social factor that acts as an barrier to conversion is a perceived negative attitude towards organic agriculture by other members of the family. Often farmers feared the reactions of parents; especially that of the father from whom they had inherited the farm, and who usually continues to live on the farm. If the young farmer wants to realize his own ideas, there is a high potential for tensions to be created with his predecessor. However, many farmers found that the predecessors learned to accept new management forms after some time; and after they had seen that the new production method was successful. A positive attitude and generous support from the life partner were highlighted as particularly important for change. In several cases, the life partner provided the drive for change as they were concerned about the use of pesticides in the vicinity of their own children.

In addition to the acceptance by family, acceptance and recognition by other farmers is an important motivation. Several farmers pointed out that there was a need for mutual respect among farmers, regardless of the form of production. Organic farmers expect respect and tolerance from non-organic colleagues; as well as understanding if things go wrong. However, non-organic farmers sometimes have the impression that they are not respected by the organic farmers. This position is counterproductive, since it can lead to alienation from both sides. A non-organic or IP Suisse farmer who does not feel respected by the organic farmers will turn away from them and be even more difficult to reach. Many of the interviewed farmers continued with collaborative arrangements with neighbouring non-organic farmers after conversion, which they interpreted as a sign of acceptance. Cooperation seems to be an indicator of good relationships. Neighboring farmers show a certain tolerance to errors of farmers who have recently converted. Mistakes and failures are considered rather as an opportunity for learning, and every farmer; even non-organic farmers, has a story of an expensive mistake from their early farming days. However technical problems, such as the use of copper do need to be solved, and ongoing efforts to solve technical problems are viewed as being central.

The interviewed organic farmers reported that they felt closely observed by neighboring farmers immediately following conversion, but that the level of observation returned to the "normal" level after a certain time. Organic farmers are judged by the same criteria as other farmers: quality and yield. Accordingly, farmers who allow weeds to get out of hand or exhibit other signs of poor quality, are not very highly regarded; regardless of the form of production they use. However, organic farmers are often seen as representatives of their form of production, and more so than is the case with non-organic farmers. Some organic growers have tried especially hard to keep fields free of weeds to prove to their neighbours that one can have orderly fields in organic farming. Thus they hoped to obtain recognition in the social environment.

One obstacle for some farmers was a perceived loss of independence, which they expected in the course of conversion to organic farming. They fear being limited by a wide range of complex rules and regulations. However, organic farmers evaluated their self-determination to be higher than before the changeover, and see this as an important positive factor. Organic production was seen to give an overall gain of self-determination, and independence from major players in the agricultural market, such as suppliers or distributors of synthetic inputs, was named as a positively experienced change after conversion.

4 Conclusions

The result of the project is an in-depth understanding of the social and personal factors that influence the conversion to organic farming, as well as how barriers have been overcome by farming families. A variety of external, technical production, social, and personal factors influenced the conversion. Farmers who had converted to organic farming often reported that the conversion was less difficult than they imagined it might be. Farmers expressed reluctance to seek external 'official' advice before they had made the mental decision to convert. These results suggest a range of concrete actions that can ease the decision process and enable this conversion within their own minds. The common theme throughout the recommendations is to facilitate communication between organic and non-organic farmers so that their similarities, rather than their differences, are in the foreground. For example, informal events and platforms for the exchange of information between organic farmers and interested non-organic farmers could motivate them to take the second step: seeking official advice.

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