



Medland, L. (2016). Working for Social Sustainability: Insights from a Spanish Organic Production Enclave. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 40(10), 1133-1156. [10]. DOI: 10.1080/21683565.2016.1224213

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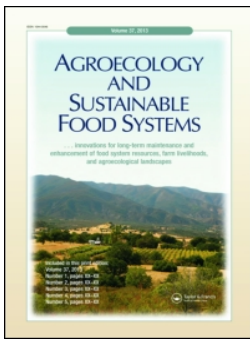
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## Working for social sustainability: insights from a Spanish organic production enclave

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To cite this article: Lydia Medland (2016) Working for social sustainability: insights from a Spanish organic production enclave, *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 40:10, 1133-1156, DOI: [10.1080/21683565.2016.1224213](https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2016.1224213)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2016.1224213>



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Accepted author version posted online: 26 Aug 2016.  
Published online: 26 Aug 2016.



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## Working for social sustainability: insights from a Spanish organic production enclave

Lydia Medland

School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

### ABSTRACT

Can the emergence of organic agriculture in global enclaves of food production be interpreted as contributing to more socially sustainable agriculture? This article discusses three narratives from semistructured interviews with farmers, farmworkers, and trade union representatives in the case of El Ejido, Spain. Here, organic agriculture can be seen to offer a small degree of breathing space from the harshest dynamics of conventional industrial food systems. In conclusion, in this case, the study shows that organic agriculture has been accompanied by experiences of small social sustainability gains and opportunities for workers and farmers, in a particularly challenging context.

### KEYWORDS

Farmworkers; labor; organic agriculture; social sustainability; Spain

### Introduction

Should we consider farm work in organic agriculture in any way different from work in conventional industrialized food systems? Under question is the issue of whether more sustainable food production is conducive to more sustainable social and working conditions. Organic agriculture is often seen as a first step in the adoption of more agroecological practices. Francis et al. (2003) define agroecology as “the integrative study of the ecology of the entire food system, encompassing ecological, economic and social dimensions”(100). *Sustainability* for agroecologists has a very strong ecological basis (Gliessman 2007). Social justice concerns of farmers and workers, should, however, also be fully supported in the systems-level approach of agroecology toward sustainability, and this is being increasingly highlighted (Food Ethics Council 2010). According to the most widely recognized contemporary agroecological principles, farmwork is now seen as a significant part of sustainability and agroecology.<sup>1</sup> The place of this study in agroecological research is therefore to contribute to the branch of inquiry which seeks to understand the roles and experiences of *people* in food production with the aspiration of moving toward “global equity” (Francis et al. 2003:102–3). Farm

**CONTACT** Lydia Medland  [Lydia.Medland@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Lydia.Medland@bristol.ac.uk)  School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, 1 Priory Road, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 1TX, UK.

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work is, therefore, crucial to the overall improvement of the sustainability of industrialized agriculture.

Sustainability may be considered in several ways. Clearly, work is not the only component of social sustainability, however, it is an element that has been under-researched in the field. Timmerman and Felix (2015) urge us to keep in mind that work, and the quality of work experienced by workers, has deep impacts on their lives, particularly when carried out for long or intensive periods of time. Considering that agriculture is the sector that employs the largest number of people worldwide, they argue that “any improvements in labor conditions will therefore have an enormous effect on overall human welfare”(524).

By engaging with the concept of the social sustainability of food systems, this article contributes to a discussion among critical food scholars, as many have articulated their analysis in relation to the notion of “social sustainability” (De Castro, Gadea, and Pedreño 2014; Nousiainen et al. 2009; Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra 2006). There is no unified definition of social sustainability in the social sciences, reflecting its inherent transdisciplinary nature. The most widely recognized definition of sustainable development is that of Brundtland (1987) as, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Since the Brundtland report, a very common “triple bottom line” approach to sustainability has developed through which environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability are assessed (Pope, Annandale, and Morrison-Saunders 2004). Sustainability assessments developed specifically for the field of agroecology have also made a major contribution to the ability of agroecologists to outline, implement, and assess sustainability gains in a comprehensive and practical way (Astier et al. 2012). This study is not entirely unrelated to such assessments, as it does seek to address a sustainability measure adopted (transition from conventional to organic production) in its context and in relation to another sustainability concern, that of working conditions. Therefore, the ethos of the study is shared by the “assessment for sustainability” approach (Pope, Annandale, and Morrison-Saunders 2004). However, this study does not seek to *assess* sustainability as such. Rather, taking a post-positivist approach to social science in the interpretivist tradition, the analysis occurs through interpretation of narratives and discourse, rather than the identification of an absolute truth regarding concrete losses or gains in sustainability (Benton and Craib 2001). The study, therefore, seeks to contribute to knowledge of farmwork in organic agriculture via deepening understanding of how farmers, workers, and trade union representatives themselves, as conscious and self-aware actors in the food system, characterize their experiences of work in organic agriculture as representing (or not) increases in sustainability, as would be

recognized according to the principles of agroecology and sustainability of the agroecology research community (Agroecology Research Group, n.d.).

An understanding of sustainability from the agroecological perspective then allows us to consider whether such experiences point toward increases in quality of work and, therefore, the social sustainability of food systems as encapsulated in the principle of agroecology and sustainability to “ensure equitable labor relations for farmworkers” (Agroecology Research Group, n.d.), as well as the principle to “optimize beneficial interactions and synergies between system components, including livelihoods and quality of life for farmworkers” (Timmermann and Félix 2015). Such definitions are relatively open, however, they give scope for themes of concern to the community to emerge from interview data in a way that a more restrictive conception of the social sustainability of work in organic farms would not. Moreover, the research is aimed at contributing to debates on food system sustainability and the recognition that this must be consistent with longstanding concerns over social justice and equity (Food Ethics Council 2010) that are also at the very foundation of the creation of labor standards.

### **Organic agriculture in a global production enclave**

Many authors have questioned whether organic agriculture really represents a significant difference from conventional farming (e.g., Guthman 2004; Hall and Mogyorody 2001). At issue is whether a “conventionalization” of organic farming has occurred in which organic farming reproduces the most “salient features” of conventional agriculture such as the influence of agribusiness (De Wit and Verhoog 2007). Yet, in the case of El Ejido, in which farmers can be almost locked into conventional agricultural systems, organic agriculture can be as a path *away* from some features of conventional agriculture, however small such differences might be. Practically, the first steps toward agroecological transition, are often taken through the process of conversion to organic production. This is particularly the case in Spain, where the transition away from industrial production is often done under the umbrella of the transition to organic farming (Guzmán et al. 2013).

There are some reasons to expect that organic and even more, agroecological food systems, might contribute to more sustainable working practices. For example, the lack of, or reduced use of, chemical and other inputs is expected to lessen workers’ exposure to harmful substances and, therefore, improve their health in the workplace. Both Jansen (2000) and Buck, Getz, and Guthman (1997) noted that this could be an expected improvement in working conditions. Yet, Jansen, for example, has also warned that such inherent benefits for workers (including farmers, their families, and hired workers) should be counterbalanced against the potential “strenuous and backbreaking” nature of the work itself (274). This contradiction of reasons for optimism and

caution plays out in many discussions around the prospects that organic agriculture may hold for farmworkers. It is something that will be explored later in this article in relation to the case of El Ejido Southern Spain.

In a region sometimes called the “Vegetable Garden of Europe” or the “Sea of Plastic,” El Ejido, is located just outside the city of Almeria in Andalusia, Southern Spain. Vast quantities of fruit and vegetables are produced for northern European consumers. Due to the drastic socioeconomic change which was state initiated and then transformed by agri-business, others have conceptualized this as an “economic miracle.” From a site of scrubland used for intermittent pasture, an industrial district was developed in which “branches of global production” were developed (Martinez Viega 2014). As one of the world’s largest concentrations of greenhouses (Sanchez-Picon, Aznar-Sanchez, and Garcia-Latorre 2011), having undergone a drastic transition in the last four decades, it has been identified as an environmental change hotspot of ecological concern by the United Nations Environment Programme (2014). Such particular social, agricultural, and economic arrangements of institutions, functioning together as a node of a global food system, are deemed agri-food production enclaves by scholars working on sites of global production who have developed the notion (De Castro, Gadea, and Pedreño 2014; Moraes et al. 2012). The concept of “enclave” is vivid, but apt for cases such as El Ejido.

The social structure of the region has been no less of a factor in deeming this a global enclave. In 2000, violent riots between migrant workers and local people exposed atrocious living and working conditions (Foro Civico Europeo 2000). This exposure helped lead to large regularizations of migrant workers which took place in the following decade (Jiménez Diaz 2010). However, while a much higher proportion of migrant workers now have regularized their working status and are, therefore, better covered by local labor law than was the case when the riots broke out in 2000, profound problems of racism and discrimination still exist (Checa, Garrido, and Olmos 2010). Trade unions also emphasize that the agreed rate of pay for greenhouse workers in particular, is the lowest of any sector in Spain (Grodira 2013).

The emergence of global enclaves of agricultural production, particularly those well documented in Latin America and elsewhere in Southern Europe, have been associated with “new patterns of mobility of transnational capital and of agricultural work,” and with a general trend toward precariousness (Moraes et al. 2012:13). Such food systems bear strong parallels with the better studied cases of enclaves of intensive agricultural production and labor relations close to the southern border of the United States, characterized as socially unjust (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). In such contexts of agri-food production, the challenge of increasing sustainability is one that may appear naïve even from the outset. Such regions and models of production have been widely critiqued for their social costs. In the Mediterranean region, the labor arrangements

underpinning the model of global food production have been a main reason for which researchers have criticized such a model of production as being founded on invisible costs to the lives of workers (Gertel and Sippel 2014).

Yet, if agroecologists wish to promote comprehensive and system-wide sustainability in global food production, it is important to engage with questions of how sustainability can be increased in a holistic and inclusive sense, including in places where the lack of social sustainability appears to be a key characteristic of the system. This should include the consideration of contexts such as El Ejido (Spain) where highly corporate export-orientated production and labor relations are characterized by social and ethnic differences. This case of organic production here takes as its default configuration an ecological and social system, which is predominantly far from agroecological. By considering the nature of work in such an enclave embedded in a corporate, global, agri-food production system, this article will aim to engage with questions around the potential of organic agriculture. Such potential might be understood in terms of scope for those embedded in enclaves of global food production to negotiate routes away from corporate modes of production toward more agroecological principles of social sustainability.

### **Organic, between sameness and difference**

This article considers whether the increase in the environmental sustainability of food systems, in the form of conversions to organic farming appears to be associated with improvements in the social sustainability of labor relations and the experience of work. The research problem corresponds to gaps in the literature identified by Jansen (2000), who called for more research regarding the possible effects of organic farming on labor relations. Although related research has developed considerably in recent years the focal point of studies raise questions which are slightly different from the one dealt with in this article. Nevertheless, such discussions are important to take into consideration in order to contextualize a discussion of findings from the data presented here.

### ***How do farmers pay for work on organic farms?***

The volume of labor required in organic farming has been a key research interest. In this respect, the debate on the social sustainability of organic and agroecological farming practices has linked social sustainability to rural regeneration or revival. Researchers have found that overall more hand labor is required in organic agriculture than in conventional agriculture and argue that organic agriculture could, therefore, contribute to rural communities and economies and help farming communities deal with problems of social isolation (Morison, Hine, and Pretty 2005). This argument is made in the light of



qualitative analysis from case studies but also through quantitative survey analysis such as that by Morrison, Hine, and Pretty (2005).

Recent research has drawn attention to other qualitative dimensions of the working relations and practices in organic agriculture, looking in depth at alternative food networks, community supported agriculture, and local food movements. For example, authors have questioned the use of volunteers and interns who are often more prepared to work in organic farms for free, in roles that they would be unlikely to accept in nonorganic production (Nousiainen et al. 2009; Weiler, Otero, and Wittman 2016). However, such studies on alternative food networks do not address the kind of organic agriculture that is most deeply embedded within industrialized global food systems. Farms in global enclaves (in contexts like El Ejido) may be perceived as less alternative, and are unlikely to be supported by the willing efforts and un(der)paid labor of volunteers or interns included in the analysis of scholars such as Weiler, Otero, and Wittman (2016). Nevertheless, the identification of structural factors in both of the studies cited above is relevant for the consideration of labor throughout organic production. The authors indicate constraints to social sustainability in organic production and these are particularly related to the broader political economy of food systems in each case.

Despite focusing on alternative food networks rather than organic production embedded in capitalist-dominated global food systems such as in El Ejido, the above insights can be considered equally relevant. Ultimately, generating the income to properly pay and support workers remains a crucial difficulty in organic farming. These constraints relate to the restrictive market structures of global food production in a global capitalist-led economy. The pressure to keep farm-gate prices low is a key component of this and is experienced in different types of organic agriculture in differing ways. In a Canadian case, Weiler, Otero, and Wittman (2016) critique the presentation of alternative food networks and work in organic agriculture as part of a moral economy, arguing that structural constraints to decent work in agriculture can be overlooked. In a Finnish case, Nousiainen et al. (2009) identify the particular restraints of global distribution channels in limiting farmers' perceptions of their potential to improve social sustainability in alternative food systems. Both of these examples highlight the enduring precarity of work where potential for social sustainability is constrained by the nature of the food systems in which they are situated. This may be the case whether considered in relation to precarious work by interns and volunteers in more closed-circuit local and organic farming systems or in the case of the precariousness of the employment of migrant workers in global agri-food enclaves.



### ***Organic: a distraction from broader state-enforced protections for workers?***

When perceived as a step in the direction of sustainability some authors have challenged the emergence of organic agriculture, and ethical trade more broadly. They have questioned its representation as a process of contemporary Polanyian style “double movement” of social resistance to the worst elements of a “market society” (Guthman 2007; Polanyi 2001). In one main current of this discussion, such forms of ethical trade are interpreted as providing a form of protective “countermovement” to the social damage of economic capitalist-led globalization (Barham 2002; Mutersbaugh 2005). Such a characterization of “countermovement” may depend on the characterization of social actors such as farmers, or export companies or cooperatives, which, depending on the case in question, can be interpreted as actors with relatively more or less power in global food systems. Barndt’s (2002) characterization of globalization of global food systems as a dual process leaves us with the same problematic: if organic agriculture represents resistance in the form of globalization from below, with farmers opting for a more sustainable mode of production, to what extent does the corporate capture of organic distribution channels compromise, or nullify such a repositioning of farmers? Seen from the perspective of farmers, conversion to organic could be characterized as a step away from the core values of conventional global capitalist-led food systems, giving them a little space to orient production toward logics other than the accumulation of wealth. Yet, from the perspective of workers, such a re-positioning of their employers toward a more sustainable mode of production may signify no change in their employment relations.

Guthman (2007) has argued that, rather than representing a process of resistance to a race-to-the-bottom model of production, “voluntary food labels” may have the counterproductive effect of legitimizing the market as the site of social protection and regulation. Guthman (2007) characterizes organic labeling and certification as a voluntary process of regulation due to its application only to certain “certified” farms, representing an option, rather than an obligation for farmers and corporations. Such a trend toward voluntarism, can be seen as one that is not unique to organic production, or even to agriculture as a sector, but rather a phenomenon that is occurring in the context of neoliberal globalization. In relation to work and labor standards, this plays into a broader critique of the shift from public to private regulation, voluntarism and “soft law” in the context of neoliberal globalization (Hepple 2005).

In this context, as argued by Guthman (2007), the kind of countermovement offered by initiatives such as organic certification, do not offer the kind of resistance *through the state* that comprehensive standard-setting of legal

mechanisms are able to. Organic production, by merit of it being an *option* for farmers, should clearly not be seen as a substitute for comprehensive labor laws and it is important not to interpret them as such when considering the role of organic in relation to farmworkers. Neither organic certification nor extra social certification, could be a *replacement* for labor rights. Rather, the question resulting from this discussion is whether organic production can offer actors involved in such production any opportunities for support in raising working standards and experiences, either directly, or through support for stronger legal mechanisms or their enforcement. Getz, Brown, and Shreck (2008) have highlighted the particular importance of relaxed labor standards in their analysis of farmworkers in the State of California (USA). They argue that there exists a culture of “agricultural exceptionalism” in which various social factors give rise to a social acceptance of very low labor standards for agricultural workers. They raise concern that the organic movement has not only been passive in respect to this exceptionalism, but has actively mobilized against worker struggles to improve working conditions in organic agriculture. From the perspective of worker rights, these cases of especially low wages in the case of workers in Southern Spain, or of resistance to the prohibition of debilitating working practices in California, are not helped by an international context in which the focus has been on promoting minimum rights (Getz, Brown, and Shreck 2008).<sup>2</sup>

A final consideration focuses not simply on what the organic movement does, but also on how social actors themselves embedded in global production enclaves, *use* the presence of organic agriculture in the region. Some authors have pointed out that ethical trade initiatives, although opt-in in character, allow social actors to engage with an “ethical complex” (Freidberg 2004). Such opportunities may allow the concerns of advocates of higher social and environmental standards to be connected with the concerns of consumers and political entities.

Perhaps the unifying challenge presented in relation to the issue of farmworker protection in organic is the challenge of the structural conditions for the agricultural sector as a whole in which one of the founding imperatives is the assurance of a provision of cheap food for largely urbanized societies in the Global North. Whether this restraint is dealt with in the context of the production and consumption of organic food in the state of California, or in the production of horticultural crops in Southern Europe, the question of price limitations, or the question of low farm-gate prices is omnipresent. The broader contextualized question here is whether to characterize the emergence of certified organic agriculture as contributing to, or distracting from, a movement toward more social and economic sustainability for farmworkers.

## The case of El Ejido, Spain

In Europe, organic production is controlled by an EU regulation that mentions working conditions only in general principles that underline an aim to produce agricultural goods that meet consumer demands and “do not harm the environment, human health, plant health or animal health and welfare” (European Council 2007). While farmers can, therefore, expect some price increase for the organic crops that they produce this may or may not result in an overall increase in profit. In principle there are no wage increases or changes in labor standards for workers. In organic agriculture, working conditions are regulated by the same labor laws and collective agreements as in the nonorganic sector, therefore, workers’ official rights and pay do not change when they work in organic agriculture (Andalucían Government 2013). In this context, the question at the center of this research is to understand how those in the site of production in El Ejido interpret organic production in relation to working practices.

The approach taken in the collection and analysis of data was to study the narratives of those involved in the production process. This approach implies that the aim was not to search for absolute truths but to base empirical research on a systematic process of inquiry that might collect plural narratives (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998). This is designed to contribute to knowledge of how those involved in vegetable production in El Ejido understand the role of organic in relation to working conditions.

The predominant nonorganic production system is based on some of the following main characteristics: vegetables are typically grown in simple plastic sheeting greenhouses, in sandy ground which is supplemented by fertilizers, nutrients, insecticides, and pesticides; many varieties grown (such as peppers and cherry tomatoes) are highly labor intensive, and the growth of the sector has, therefore, led to a demand over the past decades for low-waged casual laborers to assist the mainly small-scale farmers. This demand has been managed largely by drawing on migrant workers (Jiménez Díaz 2010). The production system is *counter-seasonal*, at its height in winter months when producers could traditionally demand higher prices because production of such crops was difficult in northern Europe. The fieldwork was carried out in the spring of 2012 and this meant that the period at which the research was taking place was during the counterseason when El Ejido was in full production with the last interviews taking place during the transition to the summer months. While some changes may have taken place in the period 2012 to the date of publication, the basic characteristics of production appear to have remained similar. Major structural changes to the mode of production, including the impact of the international financial crisis and the emergence of new competing markets were all well underway by 2012.

## Methodology

The primary research method used was semistructured interviews. This article is specifically based on interview data from three profiles of stakeholder groups who are crucial to the establishment and reproduction of this horticultural productive network in the territory of Almeria. Although the particular interest of this research was on the relevance of organic agriculture to the experience of workers' labor relations, due to the focus on the production enclave as a whole, it was felt that the perspectives of those socially situated in different subjective positions would bring a richer range of narratives and discourses to the fore. Even so, including more workers than farmers and other actors was considered necessary in order to get a more comprehensive range of perspectives. This was particularly due to the very different social situation of different categories of workers. These included native and migrant workers, documented and undocumented workers, workers who had worked only in organic or in both organic and conventional agriculture, as well as those who had not worked in organic at all but who might be able to shed light on their perceptions of it.

The interview break down was as follows: local and migrant greenhouse and packhouse workers (21 interviews); organic farmers and employers (6 interviews); institutional actors in local government (3 interviews), and finally, trade union representatives (3 interviews). The interviewees were contacted both via the snowball technique begun via academic gatekeepers as well as through other entrance points to the field such as through contacts from environmental organizations. However, in the case of organic farmers open access data provided by the local government was also used in order to identify organic farmers who were less engaged with environmental social networks (Junta de Andalucía 2016). Such different points of entry allowed for a balance between social actors involved in the organic food production system who were more highly networked and were following agroecological practices more closely, as well as farmers who produced to organic standards but who were not engaged in alternative food networks.

Workers interviewed represented a mix of those associated with the organic farmers interviewed as well as those who had been contacted independently via trade unions. As a study carried out according to sociological principles, the saturation point was considered to have been reached when new discourses regarding the research topic had been exhausted. In this study, this was reached with the analysis of over 770 quotes from the 33 interviews. Just under half of the workers interviewed were national citizens (Spanish), reflecting predominantly workers interviewed in packhouse cooperatives, while just over half (11 out of 21) were workers not born in Spain. As interviews were semistructured, each differed considerably. However, the topics introduced by the researcher were consistently the following: the agricultural sector, organic agriculture, work, work and migration, and seasonality.

Semistructured interviews were supplemented by observational data recorded through field notes and a reflexive diary. Such observation included many farm visits and informal interviews with other actors in the region such as organic certifiers, agrarian technicians, and other civil society groups, all conducted in Spanish. Furthermore, several key events such as an agricultural trade show in the region and several protest actions by a workers' union were attended as part of the research.

The 33 semistructured interviews were first transcribed verbatim. They were then analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti) to code and group quotes; some of these were then translated into English. The coding was done using an inductive approach, allowing codes to emerge during the process. Many of the thematic narratives that emerged from the analysis addressed the themes introduced by the researcher; however, it was noticeable that several prominent discourses emerged unprompted, clearly reflecting deep concerns in the community. This article is based on some of those concerns which, as will be argued, suggest that organic agriculture is giving farmers and workers some limited opportunities to gain breathing space from the harshest market dynamics of the global political economy of food.

## **Voices from a global production enclave**

### ***Farmers fight for breathing space under tight market pressures***

For some, tragically, there are some that can see that at any moment the bank is going to take their land and they'll end up with nothing. (organic farmer)

They aren't living; they're surviving on loans that are, as we say here, "eating the legs of the octopus." They don't have the means because for several years people are selling the vegetables at below the cost of production. (union representative and farmer)

The social situation of farmers in the food system of El Ejido is not straightforward. As employers of farmworkers they clearly do have some power and leverage when negotiating questions of how to organize both their own work and that of their employees. They also have the option of producing in conventional, organic, or following more agroecological principles. The four farmers that were interviewed in depth all produced organic horticultural crops and some were also attempting to build agroecological principles into their farming practices. Despite such choices, however, it is important to recognize how structurally constrained the farmers are in their choices, in particular due to the limited option of distribution channels available to them. As owners of predominantly small plots of just a few hectares, and with many dealing with significant debts, despite being employers farmers are evidently also workers in this food system. Their options are

very much constrained by the prices that they are offered by export cooperatives and overseas buyers, such as supermarkets.

Even so, the discourses emerging from this research have involved the suggestion of several ways in which organic agriculture might be seen as a useful mechanism for farmers in their negotiation of working practices within this global enclave of production. As mentioned above, one avenue that some organic farmers are exploring are the opportunities to diversify their routes to market (Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores y Ganaderos [COAG] 2014). What appeared most significant on this issue for farmers was the notion that they had options in organic. Although some of the organic farmers interviewed had had success with this model and thereby gained some independence from the pressures of international buyers, a huge limitation of this avenue is the limited consumer market for these products in the local area.

Two years ago I had an experience where I decided to take part of my crop and with the products of other organic farmers offer them over the Internet to consumers in the region. So once a week I would take my van and do the delivery house by house...but when I have to go to all the way to a village just to leave one box of vegetables, what I spend on petrol is more than what I earn... (organic farmer)

Another frustration with the conventional production that contributed to farmers' search for any decrease in pressure from buyers in global production networks was the just-in-time rhythms required of them, and, consequently, their workforce. Such frustrations, although not ostensibly related to the organic or conventional nature of the crop, do form part of the daily frustrations for both farmers and workers and contribute to the search for alternatives, such as in this case, organic agriculture.

In this sense, farmers' conversion from conventional to organic can be seen as a defense move in their economic position in order to protect what they felt were socially and environmentally reasonable rhythms of work and remuneration. For some farmers, conversion to organic could be interpreted as a Polanyian style "protective" movement to insulate themselves and their employees from the most destructive market dynamics. Others expressed similar sentiments reasoning that their conversion to organic was part of a general personal effort to work in a way that gave them more space to act in ways more compatible with social and ecological rhythms.

It is as if we were returning to our roots, to appreciating places, to appreciate more the products, not just valuing the profit. (organic farmer)

It's a case of working more in teams with yourself and the workers, you see the plot more, you work more, look more, get into everything a bit more. (organic farmer)

Conventional agriculture, well it is polluting the aquifers which are for the next generations, I mean you are polluting the air that we breathe here in Almeria.  
(organic farmer)

In their attempts to reduce market pressures, the conversion to organic can be interpreted as a strategy to increase farmers' agency to act in accordance to their own logics of production and consequently environmental and social practices, and reduce the international pressure from global food and distribution systems.

### ***Farmworkers prefer organic (a little)***

In this research, one clear narrative regarding the impact of organic agriculture was seen in the discourses of farmworkers. A repeated tendency in the interviews was for workers to state at first that there were very few differences between work in organic and nonorganic subsectors, however to follow this first impression with a qualifying clause about a perceived difference or advantage to working in the organic production subsector. This “no, but” or “same-but-different” discourse, was clearest in the case of the farmworkers interviewed, and appeared to be a response that was equally consistent for both male and female and native and foreign workers. For example, when asked about the differences in working in organic or nonorganic greenhouses in El Ejido, this worker responded:

Interviewee (I): It's the same work.

Researcher (R): The same. You don't have a preference between one or the other?

I: Ah, yes! In the sulfating yes! We can sulfite without wearing masks, that's the difference.

(worker in organic greenhouse)

One interesting observation from interview analysis was that despite employers (farmers and export cooperative managers) stating that there were no differences for workers between conventional or organic production, workers did in fact express often strong preferences for working in organic agriculture. For example, the excerpts below are from separate interviews with the manager and an employee of the same large organic export cooperative packhouse.

Well in principle the quality systems are the same for all the cooperatives. The only thing is that depending on the product itself, there will be a series of small differences. The way of working and packing is the same. (manager in organic export packhouse)

I see the organic products as much more, how can I explain it, as better, and more natural, also for people, healthier. When it comes to not having chemicals or anything well I think that it's better an organic product than a conventional one. (packhouse worker in the same organic export packhouse)



The high appreciation of interviewees of the fact that they were working “in organic” was a constant narrative and the great majority of the workers in organic expressed their preferences for working in this subsector despite the fact that the wages were the same. Evidently it is important to recognize that the “no, but” discourse begins with “no.” Yet, in the context of El Ejido it appeared that both parts of the response appeared compatible and reflected the simultaneous sense of sameness and difference experienced by workers in organic farms. At face value, clearly, the work was the same, and this would be one interpretation of the meaning of “no.” Work in conventional agriculture would typically be carried out in the same types of greenhouses, with similar crop varieties as work in organic, and is essentially the same work. Yet, having acknowledged this starting point of sameness, which is the starting point from which this study began, a difference did emerge when workers were asked if they had a preference.

Of the 21 workers interviewed in this research, the vast majority expressed a preference for working in the organic, rather than the conventional subsector of the production network. All but one either had experience working in both conventional and organic. None stated that they preferred to work in conventional production, while a small number said that they had no preference. When asked about their working experiences in organic agriculture, farm and packhouse workers in El Ejido again and again brought up the issue of health, which was something not introduced in the interview questions or themes. While not all of the workers cited health as their reasons for the preference for organic work, this was clearly an important concern.

I: I like the organic better.

R: Why’s that?

I: Less products [chemical products], look, I’m here as a disabled worker, I’ve got a respiratory problem. Here I don’t have, in the products, for me, I...

R: You see a difference?

I: Yeah, I feel it. Yes, because it’s more effort for me, breathing in sulfate and all that, here I don’t.

(worker in organic section of export packhouse)

I: I think that there is only one difference and that is safety. I mean, before when the boss came in with the sulfite, with the chemicals and all that, I didn’t stay there.

R: You didn’t?

I: No, I didn’t stay in the greenhouse, I went outside, whether he liked it or not, I had friends that died...

R: That died?

I: Yeah that died because of that, because of the chemicals.

(worker in organic greenhouse)

In taking an approach that is concerned with narrative and discourse, the point to consider here is not the verifiability of the anecdotes themselves. What is significant is the consistency with which workers pointed to reasons of health for their preference for working in the organic subsector of the production context.

I: Organic is much better for health and yeah, because of health, it's much better....

I: When working with it, not just eating...yeah, we can work with all the calm in the world because we know it's organic, we produce it ourselves here, we work it and we know what we're eating.

(worker in organic greenhouse)

The organic products are better than the conventional, even for us. I mean, we are touching them, it's not the same, to touch a cucumber, or whatever it is, that's not organic. One that's organic and not organic, it's not the same. (worker in organic export packhouse)

The case of Almeria is perhaps an extreme example of where organic agriculture appears to be very similar to conventional production. Organic production is still based on a model of production that is “under plastic” and depends on significant technical inputs as well as largely the same market mechanisms. The observation therefore that workers involved here care when even just the minimal required changes are made to meet organic regulations is interesting and relevant to the consideration of experiences of farmwork.

There is evidently a danger here of minor changes legitimating a system of improvements in only a minority of cases such as organic agriculture which only includes a small proportion of workers in the production enclave. This concerns the point raised by Guthman (2007) regarding the need for a broad countermovement through the state, rather than specific voluntary opt-in schemes of ethical trade (such as organic) that only apply to some producers. The question at the heart of this debate however is about *coherence* between the role that organic has in advocating for such specific changes (in this case organic standards) and its overall impact on the social and environmental conditions of production. Following this, the question is whether or not such specific changes are coherent with broader efforts such as the promotion or enforcement of social protections achieved through the state.

### ***Trade unions find increased opportunities for campaigning***

The trade union movement is active in El Ejido. Trade unions work alongside local government and employers' associations in the tripartite process of collective bargaining for collective agreements that in the Spanish labor law system crucially determine workers' wages, working hours, and other working conditions at the relatively local level by sector and by region (Andalucían Government 2014). Trade unions also play an important role

in numerous labor disputes and in campaigning on a broad range of labor and agricultural related issues. This threefold relevance of their role in Almeria makes their discourse relating to organic agriculture particularly insightful for interpreting how any changes in the production model in Almeria (in this case to organic agriculture), might affect labor conditions for workers in the broader production network.

In Almeria, two trade unions, COAG (Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores y Ganaderos [Coordinators of Farmers' Organizations]) and SAT (Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores [Union of Andalusian Workers]), are particularly involved in this threefold process of standard setting, arbitration and campaigning, and each have come to play a particular social role in the production enclave of Almeria. Since the riots between farmers and workers in El Ejido in 2000, the SAT, a union that originally grew out of a movement of landless Spanish agricultural workers, established itself as key representatives of migrant workers in the region. In contrast, COAG, a medium-sized farmers' union, represents local farmers and their interests and also actively campaigns on issues related to farmers' problems in hiring workers.

These two trade unions that are particularly vocal, are relevant not just because of their role in the region but also due to their involvement in the global nature of the production enclave. Recognizing the fundamental connections between the local and global political economy of the region and the global political economy of production, both unions have directed some of their advocacy efforts toward connecting with international buyers and consumers. The SAT has, for example, worked with international journalists to draw attention to the poor working and living conditions of migrant workers (Lawrence 2011) while COAG has staged demonstrations directed at supermarkets and promoted short-chain agriculture (COAG 2014). The mutual and strong support of organic agriculture from both these trade unions that represent quite different types of workers is for differing reasons. However, in both cases, their approach to organic can be interpreted as part of broader strategies to ease corporate pressures on their members.

In the case of the SAT union, organic agriculture has represented a new opportunity through which to call to account corporate employers by tapping into an "ethical complex" (Freidberg 2004). In the following interview, regarding a case in which a group of Moroccan women had been dismissed without notice and without redundancy payments from a packhouse in El Ejido, the union representative emphasizes that the international campaigning strategy that the women and the union adopted was only possible due to the fact that the women were packing organic produce.

We didn't opt for the judicial route, rather, the women organized themselves, we had rallies, and other activities and we managed to get an interview with a German

journalist who published the story in Switzerland and from there you see the other line of work that we have to do. (workers' union representative)

In this case, the European supermarket reacted to the press articles (e.g., Islam 2011) and announced that it would not continue to buy produce from the export cooperative until the women had been reemployed or compensated in compliance with the collective agreement (Andalucían Government 2014). The supermarket offered to act as intermediaries until this process had been completed. At the time of research the women had been reemployed although they were still in negotiation with their employers via the SAT union representatives about working hours. More generally, for this union, the existence of a line of organic trade has represented new opportunities for defending labor rights for all workers in the sector. They have used a logic of compatibility, emphasizing that environmental standards should be coherent with good working practices in the public eye. They have also used examples such as this case to draw attention to commonplace disregard for labor practices throughout the sector, not just in organic.

What we do is we take the story to the places where the food produced here is consumed, the consumers react and the supermarkets who base their marketing on the good environmental and social conditions are forced to act and from there comes the issue of labeling and social certification. So we have always been, well this has been part of our frontline. (workers' union representative)

Following Barrientos (2013), in this case the organic element of the production network provided an “opening point” for ethical campaigners (in this case unions) to “exploit leverage points” by tapping into the global care ethic embedded in the exposed brand and push for workers' rights. For the farmers' union, opportunities arising from organic were above all concerned with attempts to decrease farmers' dependence on supermarket buyers. This particular union developed a specific program to support organic agriculture in order to promote farmers' opportunities to develop alternative and fairer routes to sell their produce at prices that would help them cover the costs of less intensive growing cycles (COAG 2014).

Although in differing ways, the fact that both of these local unions have actively embraced different leverage points presented by organic production suggests that at the site of production, rather than providing improvements for some, at the expense of others, organic production has been a mechanism through which local groups have been able to challenge working standards and the buying practices that impact upon farmers and the wages they can pay.

### **A shared narrative: price pressure, a crucial limitation**

By far the most clear, was a narrative that emerged widely regarding the perceived injustice of the difference between farm-gate prices and prices

offered to consumers. For those interviewed, the relationship between farm-gate prices and the dynamics of the labor market were also very clear. This came across in interviews with those directly involved in agriculture as much as with those involved in the facilitation and control of the sector such as local government employees and labor inspectors.

The fruit and vegetables that they pack, is bought from the farmer at a very, very, very low price, only for you to find it at a considerable price in the shop. The farmers during these last years aren't recuperating their investments. For many farmers if the harvest doesn't go well, imagine, perhaps because it gets very cold, maybe because there's a virus, if the harvest isn't good, then that's a debt that he'll be dragging behind him year after year. (local government unemployment officer)

Even those most vulnerable workers in the region receiving lower than minimum legal wages (partly due to their undocumented status) identified farm-gate prices as one of the factors that they could see was affecting their own situation.

The price isn't OK! It's very cheap! Very cheap, very cheap. Before, well, it was better, but now with the [financial] crisis...with the crisis the price isn't good enough, maybe in these last years, the thing is much worse. (greenhouse worker [nonorganic])

This mechanism of price pressure from lead firms remained largely constant in organic as the majority of produce reaches northern European markets through the same channels of export. Below, the interview with a sales agent at a large export cooperative demonstrates the very direct link that the price mechanism has in limiting farmers' ability to fully renegotiate conditions and move away from a race-to-the-bottom logic of production for farmers and workers.

R: Who sets the price?

I: We do.

R: You do?

I: We do, with the importers.

R: With the importers? With, for example the supermarkets of the import country?

I: For example, if Tesco, through the computer program, well Tesco, if they tell me, "hey, I can pay you this," [I say] "try and pay me that" [they say] "well, well, no, I'm going to pay you that" and [I say] "go on then, OK."

(sales agent working for an export cooperative)

The importance of the higher price at which organic produce can be sold is evidently one reason why farmers in El Ejido have converted from conventional to organic agriculture. However, many still resent how big this differential is and we can interpret them, as suggested by Reynolds (2000), as still largely dependent on the same market dynamics as conventional farmers in the region.

The price in conventional has been going down for 5, 6, or 7 years and in organic, well maybe this last season we have just started to see how the prices in organic are starting to fall too, and the profit, although you can still make a salary from it, it is really quite low. (organic farmer)

It's [the price] always higher than in conventional, maybe 20%, 30%, 40%, it depends. (sales agent working for the cooperative)

In organic yes, but of course they also sell it for much more. But well, at least in organic it's a reasonable price. (organic farmer)

Together, farmers' sense of being pressured in terms of squeezed farm-gate prices and heightened pressures on their time and work force appeared to play a major role in their reasons for converting to organic. While the price premium for organic in itself did not appear to be the only main motivating factor for conversion from conventional practices because, "when you start adding it up, you realize that you need more labor" (organic farmer), the combination of slightly less acute rhythms of production and access to slightly higher prices do appear to be creating a limited breathing space for farmers and workers in organic agriculture to follow logics other than that of just-in-time production.

## Conclusion

This article has considered organic agriculture in El Ejido as a case of organic production in an enclave of a global food system embedded in a capitalist-led global food system. In this context the focus of this article has been on the question of whether organic production can offer actors involved in such an enclave any opportunities to support the social sustainability of working standards and experiences, either directly, or through support for stronger legal mechanisms or their enforcement. This article has explored the relationship between organic production and working practices that farmers, workers and other social actors in the region identify. Although only a few of the narratives that emerged from the data have been drawn upon in this article, much more could be written about work in organic, particularly in relation to labor migration and seasonal hiring practices.

A great constraint to increases in social sustainability has been identified in this article and this regards the pressure within global food systems to produce food cheaply under an intensive, productivist logic. The insights from this article reflect a very mixed group of respondents and in this regard the similarity of their responses in relation to organic agriculture has been significant. This article has looked at several positive responses to organic agriculture and many that were neither positive nor negative. Although those involved in research were mainly involved in the organic sector and this may therefore reflect their socially situated bias, it is worth noting that there were no directly critical responses in relation to the question of how working

practices were affected by organic agriculture. Many commented on a lack of difference between work in conventional or organic, but no discourse emerged around the idea that it might be worse. Drawing on the social narratives around organic and working practices in El Ejido, three significant areas have been identified where organic appeared to contribute to already existing efforts of actors in the region to gain some breathing space from the constraints of the global political economy of food. These social narratives clustered around the three profiles of social actors: farmers, workers, and trade union representatives.

Although in some respects farmers have most to gain from conversion to organic agriculture, the discourse of limitations to increases in social sustainability were most clear in their case. However, it was seen that farmers, both through exploring alternative routes of commercialization, and via the price premium in organic, do use organic production to attempt to gain some distance from just-in-time and race-to-the-bottom market mechanisms. Respondents from all groups underlined that in the context of global production, organic agriculture does not happen in isolation from the broader food system and, therefore, the opportunities provided by organic production have been interpreted in relation to the broader context of very similar institutional and structural conditions.

Another very clear factor of this *sameness* is in the fact that farmers employ workers in the same labor market as nonorganic agriculture in the context of this production enclave. The same campaigners and institutional actors also represent and regulate both organic and nonorganic sectors, with the exception of organic certification bodies that do not play any particular role in relation to labor. Most clearly the organic and conventional subsectors also function and are limited by similar market mechanisms.

Despite many constraints, it has been observed from the interviews that organic agriculture brings with it some degree of positive change and opportunity. Workers in organic appear to benefit from some increased social sustainability of working conditions and relations as they show a clear and consistent preference for working in this part of the sector, primarily due to health reasons that they experience or perceive.

Trade union representatives have strategically taken advantage of brand exposure of companies dealing with organic and this suggests that organic can be utilized by social actors at the site of production. In this sense, a *logic of coherency* has been identified in the popular understanding of organic production which campaigning organizations use to shine a spotlight on various ethical dimensions of the broader food system. This case may point to a need to question and analyze the impact of organic at the site of production more broadly, rather than only according to what it sets out to achieve. While at the site of consumption ethical trade initiatives are “selective” in terms of the impacts on the production process that they set out to



minimize (in the case of organic, regulations are in place to improve primarily environmental rather than social sustainability). At the site of production, various actors appear to use organic production in ways other than those directly foreseen by the certification initiative.

Finally, this article argues that organic production, rather than undermining a broader countermovement through the state, can be seen indirectly to contribute to it. This can be seen through the movement away from the race-to-the-bottom in working conditions, in the raising of the profile of sustainability issues for all involved in the production enclave, and in the opportunities for advocacy for the enforcement of existing legal standards by trade unions. The coherency identified between small ecological gains promoted through the implementation of organic agriculture, and small increases in social sustainability, therefore, can be seen to support the agroecological goal and principle to “optimize beneficial interactions and synergies between system components, including livelihoods and quality of life for farmworkers’ (Timmermann and Félix 2015:528). However, overall, it is farmers, workers and trade unionists themselves who are using organic agriculture as leverage for greater social sustainability in an enclave of global production.

## Notes

1. See the Timmermann and Felix’s (2015:528) shortened list of principles published by agroecologists elsewhere; see also the principles by the Agroecology Research Group, directed by Stephen Gliessman, <http://agroecology.org/Principles.html> (accessed: July 27, 2016).
2. In recent decades, at the international level through the International Labour Organisation, core labor standards have been promoted that have given higher status to four areas of rights (see the International Labour Organisation [1998] declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work). This has been interpreted by some as a regression away from a more comprehensive framework, toward a more promotionalist approach relying more heavily on voluntarism. See Alston (2004).

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the interviewees for their time, hospitality, and insights. She would also like to thank Professor Tonia Novitz, Dr. Emma Carmel, and Professor Jeffrey Henderson for their support during the drafting phases of this article. She would also like to thank Dr. David Gallar Hernández and Dr. Silvia Perez-Vitoria for their recommendations for the original research design of the empirical research. The author also would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments and suggestions.

## Funding

This work was supported by the South West Doctoral Training Centre (SWDTC), supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [grant 1325178].

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