

The Flemish Organic Research & Knowledge Network: bridging research and practice for organic food and farming in Flanders

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Authors' background

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Summary

The Flemish Organic Research & Knowledge Network (FORK-Network) forms since 2012 the heart of research and knowledge exchange for the organic sector in Flanders. The Fork-Network involves three networks: CCBT, NOBL and BBN. Central to each of these networks are how exchange of knowledge and experiences, interaction with stakeholders as well as the development of new knowledge for the organic sector can be optimised and put into practice. Drivers of the network are participatory research and knowledge exchange and dissemination of knowledge tailored to farmers. The FORK-network created a platform for OFF research and knowledge exchange, transforming a previously heterogeneous field of often unrelated actors into a denser network of experts in the field of OFF. The network established an infrastructure of cooperation which is used by an increasing number of actors and tends to maximize the benefits of cooperation through the combination of complementary activities, multidisciplinary competencies and the avoidance of duplicate efforts.

Background

Research, knowledge and information are seen as essential components for innovation and the establishment of a competitive organic sector in Flanders. A 2007 study about bottlenecks in the Flemish research for organic food and farming (OFF) revealed that cooperation between researchers, and researchers and practitioners was rather restricted and ad hoc, and that there was a lack of fitting research to the needs of the organic sector (De Mey et al., 2007). To create a better coordination, cooperation and management of research and knowledge exchange, the Strategic Action Plan for Organic Farming 2008-2012 initiated the establishment of different networks in Flanders, including NOBL (Network for Organic Food and Farming Research), CCBT (Coordinationcentre for applied research and extension on organic agriculture) and BBN (Organic Farmers' Networks). Central to each of these networks are the farmers and how exchange of knowledge and experiences, interaction with stakeholders as well as the development of new knowledge for the organic sector can be optimised and put into practice.

Main Chapter

Networks to support OFF

Organic Farmers' Networks, BBN

Since 2009, BioForum Flanders (umbrella organisation of the organic sector) and Landwijzer (training centre for organic and biodynamic agriculture) work together with the Dutch Louis Bolk Institute on the development of farmers' networks in the organic sector in Flanders. In these networks, organic farmers of the same subsector meet regularly for the exchange of technical knowledge and actualities in their sector. The farmers enter the networks on a voluntary base. The networks' agenda is formulated by the farmers themselves. A facilitator manages the organisational part, and external experts (advisors or researchers) related to the agenda items are invited. Much of the knowledge is not the result of actual research, but rather farmers' experience and the result of informal research on their own farm. Sharing experiences is the driver of BBN. There are 7 farmers' networks: poultry, dairy cattle, beef cattle, vegetables & arable crops, goats, berries and greenhouse crops. Besides activities within a specific network, networks also meet each other to exchange information and tackle common problems.

Coordination of applied research and extension on organic farming, CCBT

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CCBT is established in 2010 to stimulate the applied research and extension for OFF in Flanders and to improve cooperation between farmers and applied researchers. The research and extension work is carried out by six applied research stations in Flanders: INAGRO and PIBO Campus (vegetables and arable crops), PCG (greenhouse crops and herbs), Pcfruit (pome and stone fruit), Proefbedrijf Pluimveehouderij (poultry) and PPK (berries). For organic animal production, CCBT works closely together with a private advisory service for dairy and goat farms. CCBT itself has a budget to finance projects thanks to subsidies from the Government of Flanders. Together with the farmers' networks and the research stations, research needs are defined and translated into small scale CCBT-projects. In addition, CCBT is searching for other sources of funding and project opportunities. The centre plays a pivotal role in the translation of research project results into readily applicable information for farmers, through a website and a monthly newsletter.

Network for Organic Food and Farming Research, NOBL

NOBL is established in 2007 as a think tank for a more favourable research climate for OFF in Flanders. In the meantime, the network has become an informal platform for sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences and for supporting activities for research and information exchange for OFF. NOBL brings together researchers, policymakers, farmers and consumer organisations, mainly on a voluntary base. Currently representatives from 16 institutes and organisations meet each other regularly. NOBL's tasks and activities have been diverse, depending on its members' needs, emerging opportunities and developments in the organic sector. The different stakeholders come together to formulate advice on issues related to OFF research and knowledge exchange, priority research topics and to explore new opportunities for the funding of new research projects. Members visit each other regularly to learn about each other's work. On an international level, NOBL investigates possibilities for cooperation and knowledge exchange by actively participating in international networks (e.g. TPOrganics, Organic E-prints ...). Information relevant for research in OFF is gathered within a monthly e-newsletter for researchers and policymakers. Every second year, a research seminar is organised and an overview on the ongoing research relevant for OFF in Flanders is published. Recently, the network was, because of its collaboration with a broad group of stakeholders, officially recognised by the European Technology Platform "TPOrganics" as national mirror of the "TPOrganics" and Member of "TPOrganics".

Three networks one mission: The Flemish Organic Research and Knowledge network

In 2012, the coordinators of the different networks decided to strengthen their network's activities by using the complementarity of each of the networks and unified themselves in an informal network, the Flemish Organic Research & Knowledge network (FORK-network).

Together with the stakeholders of the individual networks, the FORK-network defined 4 strategic objectives:

- (1) increase of support for and recognition of research on organic agriculture in Flanders and Europe,
- (2) improvement of understanding of research needs of the organic sector and how to address them,
- (3) optimisation of use of research and knowledge exchange capacities for the organic sector and
- (4) dissemination and exchange of research results and knowledge.

The FORK-network's activities and actions focus on:

- *Participatory knowledge exchange*

In the BBN, the exchange of knowledge with colleagues is the core but when additional questions arise, the farmers can count on researchers and advisors closely involved in the BBN. Working with network groups demands of all parties (farmers, advisors, researchers, facilitators, ...) to tune into new 'roles'. Farmers need to take more often the lead and need to learn to express what really concerns them. Of researchers, this approach requires somewhat more reticent than common in research. Facilitator and/or advisors can help to bring language and content closer together. Experiences of facilitators in the BBN are recently summarized in a "Learning Network Guide" for those who want to start working with interactive methodologies as facilitator.

Knowledge and research do not automatically lead to innovation. Therefore, the FORK-network wants to anticipate on the synergy between the creativity and complementary experience of different actors (=co-creation), scientists and practitioners. By stimulating participatory research, the network wants to enhance the applicability of the research in the daily practice. During a conference, farmers, researchers, policy makers and other stakeholders were brought together to reflect on how to implement participatory research in Flanders and how we can evolve from 'on farm' research to real 'co-creative' research.

- *Research depending on needs*

The close interaction between the actors of the different networks should guarantee that research is sufficiently aligned with the needs of the sector. Together with BBN and the research stations, CCBT defines research needs and translates them into small scale practical research projects. Each year, 5 to 8 new research questions can be treated in CCBT-projects. Since 2010, 40 short-time projects have already been set up. Topics and research questions that need more profound research are transferred to NOBL. The members of NOBL (incl. CCBT and BBN) define the organic research strategy and agenda in Flanders.

In 2013, the FORK-network started a participatory process towards a new research strategy. The new Research Strategy for OFF 2013-2017, launched March 2014, contains a vision, 2 overarching objectives and a research

agenda for OFF in Flanders. The research agenda is organised in 3 themes: robust organic production systems, flexible organic chain systems and high quality food. As overarching objectives the FORK-network mentions the development of resilient production and chain systems and the reinforcement and scientific justification of the strengths of organic farming (increase of biodiversity, soil fertility, protection of the environment, animal wellbeing,...) in the benefit of a sustainable agriculture and society as a whole. Starting from this research agenda, NOBL and CCBT provide input for national and international research programmes: Programme for OFF research of the Government of Flanders, TP Organics, ERANET Core Organic...

- *Providing tailored information to end-users*

Different and adapted ways of dissemination of research results make it possible to reach different stakeholders: reports, databanks, newsletters, field trips, meetings, participatory research projects, workshops, conferences,... CCBT's and NOBL's website and monthly newsletters give an updated overview of organic research news in Flanders. Vulgarising CCBT-project reports summarize the research findings tailored to the farmer. Together with The Netherlands, attractive, short and applicable organic knowledge articles are developed, composed of contributions of experts from both countries. In January 2014, this Flemish-Dutch cooperation resulted in one common website for the Dutch language area: www.bioKennis.org. This website forms the central online portal for organic knowledge exchange, driven by a dynamic database full of organic knowledge articles and reports.

Core messages and conclusions

The FORK-network created a platform for OFF research and knowledge, transforming a previously heterogeneous field of often unrelated actors and networks into a denser network of experts in the field of OFF in Flanders. In addition to the specific tasks and goals of the individual networks which are oriented towards different target groups, the FORK-network established an infrastructure of cooperation which is used by an increasing number of actors. The FORK-network tends to maximize the benefits of cooperation through the combination of complementary activities, multidisciplinary competencies and the avoidance of duplicate efforts. In this way individual actors involved become more efficient and effective participants in the OFF knowledge system. The creation of open and transparent network(s) increases the accessibility of the network(s) and creates space for communication, discussion and feedback.

The network puts high value on innovation as a process of interaction and knowledge exchange between researchers and practitioners. Over the last years, a few participatory research projects and multiple small-scale projects are developed which are positively evaluated by all parties involved. But determining processes for participatory project developing, together with all stakeholders, is challenging. This new system approach demands a new way of thinking of all stakeholders, who each have their own values, goals, language and principles. A pivotal aspect in this is creation of trust. Not only trust between the farmers and researchers but also trust of research funders in this approach. The first steps are taken but it is obvious that it needs a further learning process to make participatory research more common for all actors involved.

We are aware of the small scale of Flanders' organic sector in comparison to the size of the sectors of other countries. Not in every country you can manage to get all stakeholders involved. We think however our way of co-creating in networks can be an interesting pilot for other regions. A challenge to sustain such a network is to find enough financial and human resources to develop research and innovative processes and to keep a diverse group of stakeholders and organisations with sometimes different and individual aims motivated. Except for above mentioned project funding, resources for OFF research are scarce in Flanders. The FORK-network therefore searches also for complementarity with other networks in Europe such as by stimulating Flemish researchers to participate in European projects and the extraction of knowledge from European projects, applicable for Flemish farmers.

References

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