

Agriecol, Spanish Research Network for Organic Food and Farming Building bridges between researchers and the organic sector

F. XAVIER SANS¹

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Author's Background

F. Xavier Sans is professor at the University of Barcelona and he leads the research group Agroecosystems, that focuses on the analysis of sustainability of agricultural systems. Since 2012 he is the coordinator of the Agriecol.

Summary

The launch of the research network Agriecol has strengthened communication among the Spanish research groups working in the field of organic food and farming. Agriecol also aims to provide communication among research groups and companies, associations and organic farming groups to enable them to identify and develop lines of research. This paper aims to show the activities of the research network to increase its national and international presence in order to establish synergies with organic sector and with leading research groups working on organic food farming worldwide.

Background

The organic farming research in Spain

The development of organic food and farming is a reality that emerges as a response to the need to find more environmentally-friendly farming practices, as well as to obtain healthier food. Organic farming exists in Spain for more than 30 years and it is official since 1991. The agricultural land devoted to this kind of farming has been continuously increasing and offers a very good alternative for environmental and social recovery of rural areas. Since 1991 the organic sector has continued to grow worldwide, being Spain the European country with the largest area under organic farming (with 1,756,550 hectares and over 32,724 operators in 2012). Sales of organic products was approximately 18,400 million euros in 2009, the market grew at lower rates than in previous years (Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment, 2013). The organic production is very dynamic and specialized agricultural system and is experiencing rapid growth and constant development, which requires specific professional education, knowledge and technologies. There are a number of challenges with regard to production of plant and animal products within organically managed systems, for instance because of the limited availability of some inputs in their organic form. Major constraints are related to animal nutrition, more specifically protein and micronutrients supply, and the availability of organic seeds. Furthermore, food chain management and adaptation of control systems also need to be addressed (European Commission, 2014). However, research in organic farming in Spain is still small, does not correspond to the magnitude of the sector. The number of research proposals are small and research initiatives are isolated as a result of the little interaction among researchers, and among researchers and socio-economic sector. The research network Agriecol implements a series of measures to increase national and international presence of the Spanish researchers in order to establish synergies with organic farming sector and with leading research groups working on organic farming worldwide.

Main Chapter

Objectives of Agriecol

Agriecol is a scientific and technical network for research on organic food and farming. Agriecol aims to provide communication among research groups, companies, associations and organic farming groups to enable them to identify and develop lines of research. Agriecol aims to provide communication among research groups, companies, associations and organic farming groups to enable them to identify and develop lines of research. There is a need to increase scientific knowledge and technology innovation in all areas of organic food and farming for the sustainable growth of the sector. Likewise, it is also necessary that stakeholders such as agricultural policy makers, technicians from inspection and certification bodies, advisors and farmers associations have access to technical information and to scientific knowledge. The Agriecol network provides space and tools to enhance cooperation and optimize research efforts in this sector, as well as to disseminate knowledge and technology to productive sector. The main objectives are:

1. To facilitate scientific and technical exchange between Spanish teams working in research or methods related to organic food and farming.
2. To study and identify research topics in organic farming production and food processing.
3. To promote cooperation between groups in national and regional research projects related to organic food and farming.
4. To promote international cooperation and the participation of Spanish research groups in coordinated European projects and also further afield.
5. To support the research activities of the National Organic Farming R&D Centre in Plasencia (Extremadura), and other research centres all over Spain.

¹University of Barcelona, Spain, www.ub.edu/agroecologia, www.agriecol.org, eMail: fsans@ub.edu

Agriecol gathers 79 Spanish research groups, 44 from research centres and 35 from Universities, totalling more than 300 researchers. The research network is divided in 4 working groups (organic crop production systems, organic food, organic livestock production systems, the sustainability of organic systems) with several research lines within each. Each group has a coordinator and a responsible for each of the lines of work (<http://www.agriecol.org>). All network activities are under the direction of general coordinator.

In recent years, Agriecol has organized periodical meetings to discuss the needs of research and to stimulate collaboration among research groups. The organic sector (companies, farmers associations, agrarian organisations) has been invited to engage directly in research and dissemination and to ensure that organic research in Spain is focused on the end users' needs. The policy-makers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment and from the Regional Departments of Agriculture have also been invited to meetings. Agriecol also has coordinated the expressions of interest of research groups members interested in participating in the Era-Nets CORE organic II and CORE organic Plus. Websites are important communication tools for researchers. For this reason the Agriecol website provides updated information on research calls, conferences and seminars, activities of the research groups (research lines, projects and papers). The Agriecol website links to the most important publications in the sector, as well as papers related to organic food and farming, documents about the European and national legislation on organic food and farming issues, other websites related to organic food and farming. By using the search tools on the website, you can identify the research centres and activities, identify the key contacts and offer links to their respective websites.

Core Messages and Conclusions

The development of organic farming in Spain requires more investment in research, dissemination and advice. The Spanish research network Agriecol aims to play a significant role on (i) the promotion of organic farming research, (ii) assessment of research needs, (iii) the dissemination of information and (iv) strengthening of the research groups that are part of the Network. The particularities of the organic farming research should not be a limiting factor to access R+D resources. Cofounding with private resources should allow it (i) to extend the capabilities of research and (ii) to respond to the needs of the sector.

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