

Susanne Padel, Institute of Rural Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth

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Information and Advisory Services for Organic Farming in Europe

Organic farming is increasingly recognised in the European Union (EU), by consumers, farmers, environmentalists and policy-makers alike, as a possible model for environmental, social and financial sustainability in agriculture. The 1990s witnessed very rapid growth in the sector, from less than 0.1% of the total utilisable agricultural area (UAA) in the EU in 1985 to an estimated 4 million hectares by the end of 2000 on 143,530 holdings (nearly 3 % of total UAA and 2% of holdings)(Lampkin et al., 1999).

Despite the crucial importance of information in organic farming systems as external inputs are replaced through and hence the likely influence for wider diffusion, few attempts have been made to develop a theoretical concept for organic information and advisory services. The growing body of literature about extension activities for sustainable agriculture focuses mainly on the developing world, but evaluations of the current status and broader concepts for future development of organic information and advisory provision are missing (Schmid, 1996).

A review of the situation in the EU (and three non-EU countries) in 1997 showed that information and advice is provided by a variety of governmental and private organisations. The organisational structure ranges from full integration into the mainstream agricultural extension institutions to total separation, and from publicly funded provision of information and on-farm advice free to organic or interested conventional producers, over self help groups of farmers to fully commercialised expert consultancy services (Lampkin et al., 1999). Information and advice is funded either by public support, producer levies and fees, privat sponsorship or a combination. In some mainly southern European countries, the organised advisory provision is still very limited.

In most countries organic producer associations, important actors in the general development of the organic sector, also provide information to producers. Their technical services range from publications (magazines, technical notes), over farm walks and open days to the employment of specialist advisors for farm visits, the later generally restricted to members only. If such organisations are the main supplier of information, access can be difficult for non-members, such as interested conventional farmers (Fersterer and Gruber, 1998). In some countries the organic inspectors hold a large amount of the available knowledge, but its use is hampered by the current practice of a clear separation between inspection and advice.

In a number of countries (e.g. France, Scandinavia and German speaking) the general agricultural extension services are increasingly involved in information and advice on organic farming. This can improve access to information, but there are concerns whether it covers the core principles of organic farming and is specifically adapted to the system (Fersterer and Gruber, 1998; Michelsen et al., 2001). Having to advise on organic and non-organic production methods at the same time can lead to personal role conflicts and to a loss of credibility on the side of the advisor. Organisational structures that allow greater influence of the organic producers on the subjects covered and personal to be employed (e.g. *Ökorings* in Germany) and with a mixture of public and private funding sources may represent a good solution (Hamm et al., 1996; Luley, 1997).

Purely commercial extension services or private consultants are likely to benefit only a very small number of farmers with higher incomes, very specific problems or buying or selling to a company that pays for the advice (Fersterer and Gruber, 1998).

Few countries give public support to regional and discussion groups of organic producers or networks of demonstration farms. Given the great importance of organic farmers as an information source for organic farmers (e.g. Burton et al., 1997; Wynen, 1990) and the importance that converting producer place on seeing good examples of organic practise this low level of public support is surprising. In countries with a

larger number of specialist organic advisors networks have developed, but rarely are the bodies well enough funded to ensure a good range of back-up services for the growing number of organic advisors.

Despite supporting or recommending improved advisory provision as part of a strategy for expansion of the organic sector, (e.g. Riquois, 1997; the action plans for organic farming in Finland and Norway (Anon, 1996; Landbruksdepartementet, 1995) no conceptual guidelines on their organisational structure and funding could be identified.

With a distinct premium price and market for its products organic farming is a commercial approach to agriculture. However, with its broad environmental and social objectives organic farming is a form of sustainable agriculture. For the former, expert consultancy services on a user paid basis are widely used. For the later models of support are frequently based on the notion of market failure, emphasising the social learning of farmers and the development of networks of knowledge and public ownership of information. This dual character of the organic farming sector, oriented towards the market and the public good and sustainability, at the same time, which is one of the main reasons for organic farming to be attractive to farmers and policy makers alike, represents a challenge for the development of concepts including the goals, organisational and funding structures for organic information and advisory services and this paper aims to contribute to the development of such a urgently needed debate.

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