

Development of criteria und procedures for the evaluation of the European Action Plan of Organic Food and Farming

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Abstract

Within the EU funded project ORGAP a toolbox for the evaluation of the European as well as national action plans for organic food and farming has been developed (www.orgap.org). This toolbox was based on a comparative analysis of national action plans in eight countries (CH, UK, DE, IT, DK, SI, CZ, NL, ES), a meta-evaluation of existing evaluations of national action plans, workshops with national stakeholders and a European Advisory Committee, interviews with experts. Furthermore synergies and conflicts between national and the European Action Plan were identified.

Introduction

The European Commission released in June 2004 the European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming (EUOAP). In May 2005 the EU funded 3-year research project with the acronym ORGAP started. In the project 10 partners from 9 countries (CH, UK, DE, IT, DK, SI, CZ, NL, ES) participated, as well as the European umbrella organisation of the Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM EU Regional group), ensuring a broad stakeholder consultation process and dissemination all over Europe.

Materials and methods

The overall objective of this project was to give scientific support to the implementation of the EUOAP by the development of an evaluation toolbox. Firstly the toolbox was tested on a selected number of ongoing national action plans (desk research, interviews with experts). Synergies and conflict areas between national and EUOAP targets were identified. Finally a policy analysis and recommendations were made.

Results

First a comparative documentation about the status quo of eight national or regional action plans for organic agriculture was made (Stolz, Stolze and Schmid, 2006).

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Differences in national organic action plans

The case study action plans vary with regard to the elaboration process, targets, objectives and the emphasis of measures on certain areas. This is due to quite different political and socio-economic framework conditions for organic farming in these countries. The organic action plans of Andalusia, Czech Republic, Slovenia and Denmark address a very broad portfolio of areas and measures. In contrast to this the Dutch, Italian and English action plans give high priority to measures targeted at market development and consumer information. The German Federal Organic Farming Scheme has a clear focus on measures related to public information. The comparison revealed that the weaknesses identified in the status quo analyses have only partly been translated to the targets and measures included in the action plan documents. This is on the one side a result of the national priority and budget setting and on the other side on the interdependency between EU policies and national policies

Meta evaluation of evaluations of national organic action plans

For the development of an evaluation toolbox one important step was to get an insight into already conducted evaluation studies in the field of organic action plans in Europe via meta-evaluations from DE and DK and NL and partly from England/UK. The resulting report contributed to a methodological learning process, helped to optimize the ORGAPET toolbox and provided information on the content level about the success and failure of Organic Action plans in general. It showed that it is on the one hand important to build-up on *specific tailored evaluation standards and indicators*, which can measure the programs specific characteristics. On the other hand it seems to be important, when preparing a suchlike evaluation study, to rely as well on a set of commonly accepted *general evaluation standards*. (Eichert and Dabbert, 2007).

ORGAPET development

The development of the Organic Action Plan Evaluation Toolbox (ORGAPET) was a central part of the ORGAP project. It has been elaborated in an iterative process with several versions regularly updated and further developed. ORGAPET has been developed as a web-based toolbox, with links between the different elements designed to make navigation easy. The structure for ORGAPET consists of four main sections: Section A covers background/contextual documents on organic action plans, organic farming policy, stakeholder involvement and evaluation principles and procedures. Section B deals with evaluation methods relating to action plan development and implementation processes, including conflicts and synergies, coherence, implementation failure risk and stakeholder engagement. Section C is about evaluation methods relating to action plan outputs, effects on the organic sector and impacts on public policy goals and Section D is about approaches to synthesising overall conclusions including interpretation issues relating to cause and effect relationships, interactions between elements and likely developments in the absence of the action plans or specific action points. Each section is sub-divided into a number of specific topics, with an overview document providing a guide to key issues and possible solutions, and a series of annexes providing illustrative examples, specific methodological details or useful data sources. A manual will be developed to provide an accessible guide to action plan development, evaluation and the use of ORGAPET. Furthermore it should be a tool for stakeholder involvement in future action plan development and implementation processes at national and regional level as well as EU level (Lampkin, 2007).

ORGAPET testing and assessment by stakeholders and evaluation experts

An extensive testing process of an intermediate version of ORGAPET in all ORGAP EU member states showed that stakeholders and experts view ORGAPET as a useful tool. Suggestions for structural and general changes from the experts were taken into account for the revision of ORGAPET (Dabbert and Eichert, 2006).

Focus group discussions on the national implementation of the EU Organic Action Plan

Focus group discussions with stakeholders were held between November 2006 and February 2007 in 8 EU member states (Andalusia-ES, CZ, DE, DK, England-UK, IT, NL, SI). The intention was to identify how national stakeholders perceived the EUOAP and its interplay with national policies in terms of conflict and synergy, and which strategies they would suggest in coping with implementation problems. It was not possible to discuss all aspects of the EUOAP. One topic common to all discussions was the proposal for a revised regulation on organic production, covering several recommendations of the EUOA, which is expected to be implemented by all EU member states by 2009. In addition six focus groups discussed the recommendation aiming for a more transparent European market for organic food. Instead in Italy and England they preferred to discuss the issue of funding organic food and farming policy through rural development plans i.e. as part of the general agricultural policy. The comparison of the outcome showed that only the focus groups of CZ and SI found the EUOAP important and had positive expectations to it. In the Danish group expectations to the EUOAP were positive but the EUOAP was considered insignificant. In DE, EN and IT expectations were neutral and the EUOAP was considered insufficient; in Spain (Andalusia) the EUOAP was considered insufficient and expectations negative. Only two problems appeared in most focus groups: the lack of sufficient statistical data as basis for market transparency and the GMO suggested threshold level in organic produce, where there was a common agreement that a threshold should be very low if it was to be allowed at all. All other issues were specific to the national context, suggesting that implementation problems are specific to each EU member state. The main conclusion from the analysis done here is thus that successful implementation in any member state is a matter of the balance between positive and negative aspects of all three main dimensions of implementation: willingness, capability and comprehension. These balances are unique to each member state and within each dimension. The main expectation is that more weight to positive aspects on all three dimensions will lead to more successful implementation. Furthermore the analysis showed the major importance of the conflict between the organic food and farming sector on the one hand and various threats against it from the socio-economic context, from the ideas behind the EUOAP and from its unintended impacts. (Michelsen & Tyrol Beck, 2007; Zanolli & Vairo, 2008).

Discussion

One of the main focus areas in the project was to develop a core set of appropriate indicators for ORGAPET, which then can be adapted to specific action plan evaluations. The testing showed that major problems are the data availability and limited resources for data collection, which limits the number of indicators.

Another focus area was how to measure the effectiveness and the direct effects of the policy separate from the general performance of the organic sector. What is the impact of exogenous events and how can these be addressed in an evaluation? As

conclusion, it is important to focus on the performance of the measures against indicators. This does provide an overall picture on the impact of the OAP on the organic farming sector or the wider bio-physical, social and economic environment.

The third major focus was stakeholder involvement in the elaboration of action plans, which was the main topic regarding the revision process of Regulation (EEC) 2092/91 in 2006 and 2007. When looking at examples of the way in which stakeholder interests have been taken into account in national action plans, it is interesting that the approach chosen in some countries was quite differing, ranging from a broad participatory approach to a very top-down approach with a small expert group. Some made good experiences with a broad involvement not only of the organic but also the conventional sector (as in DK) or with stronger focus on market actors as in NL (Dabbert and Eichert, 2006).

Conclusions - what are the lessons to be learnt?

When planning a new or revising an existing action plan it is recommended to study first the different approaches of other action plans (e.g. market-driven versus policy-driven). When a participatory approach is chosen, then stakeholders should be involved in different phases of a policy development (agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation). Furthermore the experiences within in the project showed that focus group discussions may be used to gain information from the organic food and farming sector itself, while less involved outsiders should be approached in a different way, e.g. by individual interviews after data had been collected from members of the organic food and farming sector in order to ask the outsider for comments to the main arguments of the organic sector.

For the evaluation of organic action plans it is important not only to follow a general accepted evaluation standard but also to elaborate and build-up specific, tailored indicators (standards) adequate to the national action plan; here ORGAPET provides both a procedure for selection as well as examples. Furthermore it is important to differentiate clearly between depiction of facts and areas more open for interpretation through the inclusion of stakeholder (e.g. by a stakeholder reflexion workshop as in DE evaluation) and to ensure sufficient data availability and resources for data search.

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