



Organic Agriculture: a new field of policy for international organizations

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Five years ago, some Danish researchers produced a knowledge synthesis on globalisation of organic agriculture. They formed the DARCOF III research project GLOBALORG and reviewed policies of international organizations with regard to organic agriculture.

This article provides a status on the extent to which the situation has improved for organic agriculture through the last five years regarding its standing with international organizations.

The present article examines global policy documents and development literature and analyse perspectives on the role of organic agriculture as a possible vehicle for sustainable development, even in low income countries. The article shows that not only has organics made entry in terms of projects and programmes in many low income countries but it is also gaining position in formal policies and strategies of international donor agencies and organizations.

Introduction

The Global Report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) published by Island Press in 2009 as "Agriculture at a Crossroads", placed organic agriculture (OA) firmly among the policy options at disposal of policymakers pursuing internationally agreed policy goals of sustainable development. Only a few months later, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), announced UNCTAD would further step up its work on organic agriculture, now seen

as a key means of addressing Africa's food security crisis. And in June 2009, EuropeAid hosted a conference on the topic of organic farming as a development pathway, at the Info Point External Cooperation in Brussels.

As shown below, these reflections of breakthroughs for OA at the international development policy level are based on or follow a series of developments and efforts undertaken worldwide within the last half decade, particularly, and involving also the FAO, UNEP, as well as some internationally oriented research and bilateral donor organizations'. As a result, leading capacities at international development agencies now understands organic farming as a pathway to sustainable development. Through the UN system as a whole, some now promote OA as a component of the Green New Deal (GND) policy, while individual UN agencies – like the FAO and UNCTAD – have developed formal policies explicitly favouring organic agriculture as such.

The last five years of organic agriculture

For what seems a very long time, the international de-



velopment community had a limited or rather stereotypical understanding of the developmental values of OA in resource-poor areas. Discussions were often based on narrow measures of yield of a certain crop or monetary value or imagined counterfactuals dreamed up from data from temperate countries and/or energy intensive agricultural systems. However, focusing on agriculture as a vehicle for pro-poor development, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) included an organic route on its map by 2006 and in May 2007, the Food and Agriculture organization of the United Nations (FAO) hosted an international conference on the role of OA in food security.

New understanding of OA

The conference marked a new and improved understanding of OA as possibly providing not only environmental sustainability, but livelihood and food security, also in resource poor and low input contexts. Then in 2008 the World Development Report 2008 - refocusing on agriculture after a quarter

of a century – acknowledged certified organic agriculture (COA) for its demonstrated success in terms of providing export value, also for developing countries.

Food miles and footprints

While eco-efficiency, eco-taxes and pesticide taxes are concepts that have yet to find their way to a future WDR, the WDR vocabulary of 2008 already include "food miles" and "environmental footprints" – and the WDR does see a need to "reduce the environmental footprint of intensive crop and livestock systems" and reduce the impacts of "agro-chemical and animal waste pollution".

The World Bank, however, is yet to announce any major programme to help ensure that the essentially organic qualities of the majority of products by the great majority of African and Latin-American smallholders, can be duly and systematically appreciated and valued by, and therefore wholly paid for, in the world market as a whole.

Like any market, namely, the world market is an institution no more intelligent than public policies makes it, which is not a lot given the weaknesses of international governance. In parallel with these developments, some of the worlds leading developing nations have progressed simultaneously in embracing COA - a process of evolution that a team of Danish researchers have followed at close hold in Brazil, China, Egypt and East Africa. GLOBALORG collaborates with EMBRABA – a giant research body with 27 of its research centres

collaborating primarily on agronomic and technical aspects of organic production. In China, GLOBALORG collaborate with a Chinese partner, launching the first "organic" policy research project at the Chinese Center for Agricultural Policy (CCAP).

Visible OA-progress

The progress of the organic sector in both these economic giants has reached a stage where it has become visible in the agricultural and food system policy agendas. At the same time, the little more than five-year old International Society of Organic Farming Research (ISOFAR), has gained capacity to undertake events at the global scale as demonstrated by the 2008 ISOFAR Conference in Modena, Italy. That capacity is required to help facilitate a global scientific society. ISOFAR is much needed as massive future efforts are required to document the multitude of biogeophysical and entropic aspects of the world's food and fibre system.

Such documentation is increasingly demanded by the world's nations, in a future where the environmental footprints, energy input-output accounts, global warming potential and GHG emissions, material flows, food miles, cradle to cradle (C2C) traits and other measures of agricultural production prove increasingly important. Important not only as essential institutional requirements for our food and fibre system to evolve along a more environmentally sustainable pathway, but as categories of measures increasingly elevated to a status where they – and the higher or lower levels of eco-efficiency they represent – will have "real dollar value" implications in future economic policy environments featuring carbon and energy taxes - and prohibiting agrochemicals having green house gas (GHG) effects.

In Denmark, the former Danish Agricultural Research Centre for Organic



Farming (DARCOF) significantly expanded, adding an international mandate and international board and becoming International Centre for Research in Organic Food Systems (ICROFS).

Lost interest in agriculture

Development studies long understood agriculture as an engine for development with forward and backward linkages and multiplier effects. By the turn of the century, however, most international organizations and International Development Agencies (IDA's) had lost interest in agriculture.

In this new millennium, balances of power over agricultural policies have partially shifted gravity from sector ministries towards a broader political realm matching a new economic paradigm of environmental and ecological economics, enabling a contemporary understanding of agriculture's multifunctional roles.

Analogy to car industry downfall

This new paradigm – involving criteria such as eco-efficiency, energy (i.e. embodied energy) and global warming potential (GWP) and other increasingly operationalisable sustainability indicators – is destined to wreck the same kind of havoc on old-fashioned energy-intense food, fibre and farming systems that the absence of clear

policies based on similar indicators has now wrecked on the western car industry. As pointed out by a remarkable article published by "Economist" in July 2009, it was the absence of green taxes that killed the US car industry, leading that industry towards an unsustainable SUV market instead of innovating environmentally sustainable cars. Now, in a world increasingly suffering from not taxing pollution and resource use very much and having weakly operationalized and enforced energy- and eco-standards in the global food system, low income countries (LICs) enter the market with comparative advantage and major de-facto or "non-market organic" areas rather ready for certification.

International development agencies may help

International development agencies could now act to help generally reform national and international institutional environments to become far more conducive to sustainable agricultural methods by backing

up green taxes, as per the Green New Deal. Yet, opportunities to help exist, even for donors whose eyes are blind to the role of the state and public policies as provider of institutional requirements for sustainable development.

Such donors, often wishing to focus all their efforts on market driven options and the private sector, can take note that pioneering companies like the Danish "Thiese" and "Solhjul" have demonstrated how business and development can be successfully combined, also in Africa.

In any case, donors no longer face any shortage of advice on how to help development of OA in the South. They can, for instance follow the example of the Swedish development agency and assist African farmers to go certified organic and thus enhance the farmers' capacities to compete in global markets. They can choose among no less than 50 more concrete recommendations compiled by UNEP, UNCTAD and the Capacity Building Task for on Trade, Environment and Development, all aimed at giving recognition and encouragement to the organic sector – and to remove obstacles and biases against OA (CBTF 2006).

Yet, a host of scientific and technical research-demands arise from the expansion



of certified OA. Indeed, an Organic Research Centres Alliance (ORCA) has been proposed to internationally network and strengthen existing institutions with scientific credentials and help empower the same to become centers of excellence in transdisciplinary organic agriculture research. COA, with its stringent rules on external input use has to be even more innovative than conventional agriculture, to solve production and processing problems.

Projected increases in COA raise additional opportunities for OA research institutes to contribute to development goals, through helping to develop, maintain or optimize agricultural productivity and soil nutrient levels whilst controlling costs, improving labor efficiencies and harvesting synergies from crop rotations, crop-livestock systems and all the other ecologically based principles characterizing OA.

A greener CAP

Perhaps, it was the recognition of such synergies and multiple positive externalities of OA that once led the European Commission to realize how opportunities existed and exist for harvesting "dividends" of public policy through a greener CAP. Low income countries (LICs) are often in a completely different situation with no dividends to harvest (as governments



in poor countries hardly pay subsidies) and no significant volumes of non-renewable resources use and pollution to tax (as LIC farmers use little fossil fuel, fertilizer and pesticides). On top, significant constraints remain for LIC farmers to profitably produce, process and market organic products for export, and even more: for being rewarded as environmentally benign producers, in their own domestic markets as well. Yet, low wages and tropical geographies, may add comparative and potentially competitive advantage in some cases.

Premium prices may decline

Of course, the current organic price premiums may decline in the long term, as supply catch up with demand in this or that organic product line. A lower price premium will then make OA less economic for many small producers in LICs with poor rural infrastructure and services.

Still, organic practices in low external input systems can increase combined market and non-market gains significantly for organic methods to remain preferable. All this is of the essence to African countries in particular, continuing to face strategic choices on their future agricultural development, where views remain split between one continuing to draw on the Asian Green Revolution along with gmo's and proprietary technologies - and then a different one focusing on the absence in Africa of the kinds of economic, geographical, infrastructural, institutional and geopolitical conditions that charac-

terized Asia at the time of the Green Revolution (www.resakss.org)

Concluding thoughts

International organizations have moved beyond only putting COA into a development policy perspective [cf. ref. 2]. The FAO is promoting ORCA - one ORCA promoter has become USDA Deputy Secretary – and leading UN agencies have clear policies on or supports COA. In 2005, when two Danish authors proposed "a global research programme for organic food and farming", published in 2006 by CABI [cf. ref. 4], the authors hardly dared hope that any such programme would be reality by 2009. Now, indeed OA has become "A New Field of International Development Policy" [cf. ref 1], is among the "Options for Enabling Policies and Regulatory Environments" and emerging as a component of the low input paradigm destined to provide adapta-

tion and mitigation solutions for our common future in the "greenhouse", i.e for a climate changing world.

So, we believe COA has come of age as a new field of international development policy and now we dare hope the global movement of organic consumers and producers can strengthen their indispensable global role in keeping OA on the international policy agenda even further.

What we hardly dare hope now, is for a near-future transition towards an institutional environment fully conducive to organic farming. A transition drawing full policy consequences of future generations depending on the multi-functionality of the agricultural system and on the biosphere as a whole, rather than on a man-made monetary subsystem . Policy consequences a la the Green New Deal, which does embrace OA.

A most challenging overall institutional constraint with regard to how far a purely market driven COA can be instrumental to a global transition to sustainable agriculture was discussed by this author in ICROFS Nyt 2009; 2. With so many active IOs entering the game and the prospect of a Green New Deal, this new field of policy can only become even more exiting in the years to come.



Dr. Henrik Egelyng discussing the UN's green new deal as member of a panel of the Asia-Europe Environment Forum roundtable on "The Accounting of Nature: Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Asia and Europe" - hosted by the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 29 – 30 June 2009 in Hayama, Japan.

Further reading

- 1: Organic Agriculture: A New Field of International Development Policy. <http://orgprints.org/12508>
- 2: Organic Agriculture in a Development Policy Perspective. <http://orgprints.org/7578>
- 3: Afrika – Fremtidens Økologisk Kontinent. <http://orgprints.org/14814>
4. http://www.cabi.org/bk_BookDisplay.asp?PID=1937
- 5: http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/infopoint/conferences/2009/06-24_organicfarmingindex_en.htm
- 6: http://www.fao.org/organicag/ofs/docs_en.htm
- 7: http://www.unctad.org/trade_env/topicOA.asp
- 8: Izac, A.-M.; Egelyng, H. et al. (2009) "Options for enabling policies and regulatory environments," in McIntyre, B.D. et al (eds.). *Agriculture at a Crossroads - Volume I: The Global Report - International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology for Development*, chapter 7. Volume I: The Global Report Volume I: The Global Report. Island Press. (<http://www.islandpress.org/iaastd>).