

Food safety in an organic perspective

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Introduction

The public focus on food safety in Europe has grown due to the BSE scandal, problems with Salmonella and Campylobacter, etc., and health and safety are among the most important motives for buying organic food. But the scientific evidence does not clearly show that organic foods are healthier than conventional. At the same time the organic sector grows rapidly and this growth is to some extent due to the imitation of conventional rational production, processing and marketing methods. This background motivates a focus on food safety in the development of organic agriculture and on what food safety is in an organic perspective.

Discussion

The holistic perspective of organic farming implies a broader conception of food safety that includes both product safety and agri-food system safety (Hansen et al., in prep.). Product safety concerns the inherent quality of the product (direct health effects due to e.g. harmful substances, pathogens, nutritional quality, etc.), while agri-food system safety concerns the organic production, processing and distribution processes (e.g. indirect health effects, food supply, transparency, participation, responsibility, etc.).

The credibility of organic food can only be maintained if the organic agri-food system is developed in correspondence with the basic organic principles (Alrøe et al., 2002). There are different ways of increasing food safety in view of these principles. For instance by way of precautionary action towards new technologies and their potential effects on the environment and human health, by way of producing, processing and distributing organic foods in transparent, sustainable systems that are kept as simple and local as possible, and by way of keeping these organic food systems separate from the conventional systems.

Conclusion

Organic agriculture should be developed in agreement with a comprehensive conception of food safety. In this way it will be possible to show the whole organic agri-food system as a safer alternative to conventional farming. Thereby trust will be supported in organic foods despite the sparse (and often unattainable) hard scientific evidence that organic food is healthier.

References

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