

Consumer views on the new mandatory EU logo for organic food

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Abstract

In July 2010, the new mandatory EU logo for organic food was introduced to make the identification of organic products easier for consumers. In the present study we analysed how consumers in five EU countries view a mandatory EU logo for organic food to make recommendations for agrarian decision-makers and market actors in the organic sector. The study was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods with consumers of organic food in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. Firstly, 15 focus group discussions were conducted to reveal the spectrum of consumer perceptions. In a subsequent survey with 2042 participants consumer views on key issues were quantified. Finally, the results of the qualitative and quantitative studies were brought together. Our findings suggest that a mandatory EU logo for organic food was basically welcomed in all countries, however, trust in the underlying production standards and the inspection system was not very pronounced (except in Italy). We conclude that the introduction of the new EU logo should be supported by communication campaigns to make clear what the new logo stands for and remove unfounded consumer concerns regarding the downscaling of standards and the trustworthiness of the inspection system.

Introduction

In the European Union (EU), a food product can be labelled 'organic' if it complies with the principles for organic production, processing, labelling and control according to Regulation (EC) No 834/2007. Since July 2010, all prepacked organic products produced within the EU must carry the new mandatory EU logo for organic food. The mandatory logo is targeted at end-consumers: It was introduced to strengthen the organic sector by making the identification of organic products easier for consumers (Regulation (EU) No 271/2010). While the proposal of a mandatory EU logo was discussed controversially within the organic sector upon announcement of the draft regulation (see e.g. Blake 2009), to date little is known about consumer views on the issue. Consumer trust, however, is of crucial importance for an organic label to be effective (Jahn *et al.* 2005, Golan *et al.* 2001). The present study analyses consumer views towards a mandatory EU logo in five European countries by a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The aim is to get insights into the positive and negative aspects that consumers connect with such a label. The overall objective of the study is to give recommendations for agrarian decision-makers and market actors in the organic sector.

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Materials and methods

The present study was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to get a more comprehensive picture of consumer views in the five EU countries Czech Republic (CZ), Denmark (DK), Germany (DE), Italy (IT), and United Kingdom (UK). With qualitative methods it was identified *which* issues and concerns matter to consumers regarding a mandatory EU logo for organic food and *why* this is the case. In focus group discussions, the participants were asked for their views on the introduction of a new mandatory EU logo for organic food.³ A total of 15 focus groups (3 groups per country) with 149 consumers of organic food was conducted in May and June 2009. The data was analysed with qualitative content analysis. In the subsequent quantitative study conducted in February and March 2010, 2042 consumers of organic food participated in structured written interviews in the five countries to quantify and statistically test consumer views on key issues that were raised in the focus group discussions. In the self-administered questionnaire, the participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements on different aspects of the new labelling regulations.³ A seven-point Likert-scale was used with 1 'I strongly disagree', 4 'I neither agree nor disagree' and 7 'I strongly agree'. The data analysis was based on descriptive statistics and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether the statement means were significantly different in the five study countries.⁴ In the final step, the results of the qualitative and quantitative studies were brought together in a combined analysis.

Results

In the focus group discussions, the introduction of a new mandatory EU logo for organic food was both welcomed and contested. On the one side it was suggested that a mandatory logo would make the recognition of organic products easier, whereas other people found the existing organic logos were sufficient or even feared that a new logo could cause consumer confusion. In the quantitative survey (see Table 1), the great majority of participants in all countries welcomed to have an EU-wide logo for certified organic products (statement 1), whereas a more diverse picture was found for statement 2 "without a mandatory EU organic logo, some food products are hard to identify as organic at the point of sale". The participants only slightly disagreed with or tended to be undecided on statement 3 "there are more than enough organic logos already and a new mandatory organic logo will just add complexity to the market".

The focus group discussions revealed interesting consumer perceptions of the production standards and the inspection system behind a mandatory EU logo. In all countries except Italy, it was assumed that the production standards behind the new EU logo would be lower than the respective domestic standards. In addition, concerns were raised in all countries except Denmark regarding the trustworthiness of the inspection system. Nevertheless, it was generally welcomed to have common EU-wide minimum standards for organic production and control, as long as each member

³ Since the study took place prior to the final decision on the design of the new logo, the participants were informed that a common mandatory logo would be introduced, but a picture of the new EU logo itself was not shown. The new mandatory indication of origin of the raw materials was also subject of the focus group discussions and the structured interviews but the results are not included in this paper due to the limited space.

⁴ ANOVA techniques are based on a comparison of the variance among the means with the variance within the samples, and not on a direct comparison of group means (Hair et al. 2010).

state would be free to have stricter national regulations. The results of the quantitative survey (see Table 1) confirmed that in all countries, it was largely welcomed to have the same minimum standards all over the EU (statement 4). However, the level of agreement with the statements on trust in the inspection system (statement 5) and the organic standards (statement 6) behind an EU logo was significantly lower in all countries.

The overall country comparison revealed that consumer acceptance of the new logo was different across the EU countries. Two significantly distinct countries could be identified: In Italy, the new EU logo was basically welcomed without reservation, whereas in the UK, both support and scepticism towards a mandatory EU logo were present. In Denmark, Germany and the Czech Republic, trust in the standards and the inspection system behind the EU logo was higher than in the UK but still not particularly pronounced.

Tab. 1: Country comparison of views on a new mandatory EU logo

Statements	Statement means ¹					ANOVA Welch-value ²
	CZ	DE	DK	IT	UK	
1. It is a good idea to have an EU-wide logo for certified organic products.	5.52 ^a	5.72 ^a	5.62 ^a	6.51 ^b	5.12 ^c	65.03***
2. Without a mandatory EU organic logo, some food products are hard to identify as organic at the point of sale.	4.31 ^a	5.43 ^b	5.23 ^b	6.06 ^c	4.18 ^a	10.10***
3. There are more than enough organic logos already and a new, mandatory organic logo will just add complexity to the market.	3.15 ^{a,b}	3.32 ^{a,b}	3.44 ^{a,c}	2.95 ^b	3.76 ^c	38.02***
4. It is a good idea to have the same minimum standards for organic products all over the EU.	5.52 ^a	6.19 ^{b,c}	6.05 ^c	6.40 ^b	5.72 ^a	36.16***
5. I have great trust in the inspection system behind an EU-wide organic logo.	4.76 ^a	4.18 ^b	4.36 ^b	5.17 ^c	3.78 ^d	41.37***
6. I have great trust in the organic standards behind an EU-wide organic logo.	4.87 ^a	4.30 ^b	4.47 ^b	5.20 ^c	3.91 ^d	20.76***

¹ The level of agreement was measured on a seven-point Likert-scale with 1 'I strongly disagree', 4 'I neither agree nor disagree' and 7 'I strongly agree'.

² The ANOVA was based on the Welch-test since equality of variances in the different countries could not be assumed (based on Levene's test for equality of variances).

^{a, b, c, d} Statement means with different letters are significantly different between the countries ($p < 0.05$, ANOVA post-hoc tests Tamhane's T2).

*** Differences in variance significant at the level $p < 0.001$.

Discussion and Conclusions

In accordance with previous studies we found that many participants lacked knowledge on organic production and certification (Sawyer *et al.* 2009, Aertsens *et al.* 2009, Hughner *et al.* 2007), which gave rise to (unfounded) concerns regarding the production standards and the inspection system behind the new EU logo. This might be problematic since according to Verbeke (2008), product information – like a logo – can only have a favourable impact on food choice if consumers have a sufficient level of knowledge about the subject at hand. Thus, our findings suggest that for achieving the objective of strengthening the organic sector (Regulation (EU) No 271/2010), it might not be enough to simply launch a new mandatory organic logo without any supportive communication measures. In particular, this holds true since the new logo (a stylised leaf composed of stars) is not self-explanatory and does not clearly refer to organic production. We therefore conclude that consumer trust should be strengthened by communication campaigns explaining what the new logo stands for

and why it is a benefit, especially in those countries where the former voluntary EU logo for organic food was not very common. Public financial support for the new EU logo is recommended and also justified since organic agriculture contributes to public welfare by preserving natural resources and contributing to rural development, which is recognised by EU legislation (Regulation (EC) No 834/2007).

Given the country differences in consumer perceptions, communication campaigns on the new EU logo should be tailored to specific country conditions. In Germany, for instance, it should be highlighted that the new EU logo is equivalent to the German governmental logo 'Bio-Siegel'. In Denmark and the Czech Republic, it should be communicated that the new EU logo and the governmental logo are based on the same production standards. An aspect that should be emphasised in all countries is that the logo guarantees EU-wide regular inspection of production processes, since our study showed that consumers know very little about organic certification.

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