

Coordination of European Transnational Research in Organic Food and Farming Systems

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CORE Organic II

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Summary

Organic agriculture and food markets have grown considerably, and organic agriculture addresses important challenges of European agriculture, such as the sustainable production of high-quality food, reducing dependency on high energy inputs, improving environmental and nature conservation, climate change adaptation, animal welfare and rural livelihoods. Organic farming and food systems still have a huge potential for innovation and improved solutions. Research activities will be important for this.

Coordinated transnational research has the potential to create a less fragmented research area in this fast growing sector. CORE Organic II builds on the outcome of the first CORE Organic. Aiming at an effective and sustainable transnational research programme, it will identify common research priorities for the organic sector where a transnational approach will give added value, launch at least two transnational calls, initiate research projects, organise project monitoring and dissemination of results, and consider funding models.

CORE Organic II will also develop all components to continue the transnational research activities beyond the ERA-NET. The results of CORE Organic II will be a strong and sustainable network of funding bodies, all components for the effective continuation of collaboration, a series of ongoing research projects and a plan to support dissemination.

The expected benefits for Europe will be to reinforce its leading status and excellence in organic research, enhance the European research area on organic agriculture, increase the efficiency in use of organic research funds and improve the impact of research on the organic sector's development. Initiating projects on topics identified as common priorities will allow the sector to better meet the demand for organic food and products. This will contribute to sustainable development in food production and improve the general competitiveness of the European agriculture.

Problem

Organic research is a rather small research area in the individual partner countries, and therefore tends to be fragmented.

By making transnational calls, the research will be less fragmented. A transnational approach in organic research will allow initiation of research on topics of common interest and will benefit from the diversity of conditions and practices in the countries involved. In particular, some specific areas of organic farming and food would be better addressed by a transnational approach due to their transboundary nature and general importance (e.g. climate change, genetic improvement of plants and livestock, regulatory and trade aspects).

Background and objectives

BACKGROUND

The EU currently has the leading role globally in organic research. However, there is a need to strengthen the partnership between Member States, associated countries and the European Community, so that coordination of transnational research in organic farming and food systems will address the EU Commission's concern for improved coordination of research efforts with a long-term perspective and create a less fragmented research area in this fast growing sector. Increasing the transnational cooperation will therefore reinforce Europe's leading status and excellence in organic research, increase coherence across Europe and improve the overall impact of research on the development of the organic sector.

As a first step in establishing transnationally funded research for organic farming and food systems at the EU level, an FP6 ERA-NET, Coordination of European Transnational Research in Organic Food and Farming (CORE Organic; ERAC-CT-2004-011716; referred to as CORE Organic I) was established in 2004 by 11 European partner countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Among other things, the project carried out a mapping of research programmes and research infrastructures. In the prioritisation of transnational research topics, the following three topics were chosen for a transnational pilot call: animal disease and parasite management; organic food, quality and safety; innovative marketing strategies. Some 37 proposals were submitted and evaluated by peer review. Eight research projects were selected (<http://www.coreorganic.org/research/index.html>) and funded by means of a virtual common pot. The projects were initiated just before CORE Organic I ended in 2007, and they have finished/will finish between June 2010 and June 2011.

The ERA-NET also successfully contributed to meeting the demand for transparency within national and transnational research in organic farming and food systems by the establishment of an open archive,

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Organic Eprints (<http://www.orgprints.org>), which contains more than 9 000 research papers.

The experience gained in CORE Organic I led to expectations that transnational collaboration for organic farming and food systems:

- ▶ is necessary to increase the volume, quality and common relevance of research in organic farming and food systems and to tackle important research topics, which demand high investment, are interdisciplinary, and which have a cross-national relevance;
- ▶ makes it possible to develop and share 'good practices' in programme implementation and monitoring, and to provide better inputs for evidence-based policymaking and further development of future joint research programmes;
- ▶ makes it possible to speed up research in new areas of common importance for the development and integrity of organic farming and food;
- ▶ increases comparability of research results and enables channelling of significant parts of national research funding into common programmes;
- ▶ makes it possible to learn from each other;
- ▶ ensures transparency in terms of easily accessible information regarding research priorities, programmes, funding mechanisms and ongoing research projects as well as publications and results, which are in great demand by different stakeholders.

The 11 partner countries in CORE Organic I recognised the benefit of transnational collaboration for organic research and decided to continue and expand the collaboration. They formed the CORE Organic 'Funding Body Network' in order to monitor and evaluate the eight CORE Organic I pilot projects, to broaden the collaboration and to pursue efforts towards a long-term collaboration in organic research. Since then, the Funding Body Network has continued to work towards these objectives. It has expanded from 11 to 21 countries. The framework of an ERA-NET and the support of the European Commission will ensure that the network is fully operational and will deepen the collaboration between the national funding bodies in the 21 partner countries. It will facilitate the integration of the 10 new countries in the network activities, including the prioritisation of research topics in all partner countries, and will allow consideration of further expansion to other countries. It will thereby give impulse to the future of organic research in all partner countries involved.

OBJECTIVES

The main strategic objective of CORE Organic II is to enhance the quality, relevance and utilisation of resources in research in organic farming and food systems in Europe. CORE Organic II will contribute to the de-

velopment and integrity of the organic sector by making joint transnational calls, selecting and initiating research projects, and establishing the framework for a strategic research agenda as a basis for long-term collaboration between the partner countries. Some general objectives of CORE Organic II through its different components are:

- ▶ to launch transnational calls;
- ▶ to strengthen the leading role of the EU in organic research in building up a less fragmented research area by consolidating a strong network of Member States and associated countries able to confirm the role of European organic research on the global map;
- ▶ to give momentum to long-term transnational collaboration for organic research between the partners and secure the effective continuation of the collaboration beyond the ERA-NET, by putting in place the structures and models for lasting collaboration and transnational research beyond CORE Organic II;
- ▶ to ensure the involvement of stakeholders and dissemination of research results, and to promote circulation of knowledge (not only in Europe but also globally);
- ▶ to refine, develop and deliver best practices and tools for organising and conducting transnational research in organic farming and food systems.

Methodology

CORE Organic II will ensure the transition between the model call and pilot projects of CORE Organic I and a stable long-term collaboration for launching regular transnational calls, conducting organic research projects and disseminating their results. It will also take account of the experience of, and synergies with, other ERA-NETs, and of the content of the toolbox developed by ERALEARN.

Main findings and outcomes (results) or expected results

The CORE Organic II identified the research topics for the first call at the kick-off meeting in April 2010. During the following months, the call texts were finalised and adopted. Three thematic areas were selected for the first call: (i) Cropping: Designing robust and productive cropping systems at field, farm and landscape level; (ii) Monogastric: Robust and competitive production systems for pigs, poultry and fish; and (iii) Quality: Ensuring quality and safety of organic food along the whole chain.

CORE Organic II launched the first call for pre-proposals in September 2010 with a pre-announcement of the call text 1 July 2010. Fifty-nine applications were received and the partners selected 25 who were invited to submit full proposals. These full proposals were assessed by scientific expert

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panels and 17 of them were recommended for funding. The partners will meet in May 2011 to select the projects to be funded.

The second call is under preparation. The first draft of the call texts will be discussed in May 2011 and call boards will be established to finalise the call texts until the final agreement at a meeting in November 2011. The second call will be launched in January 2012.

For the second call, the possibility of a shared call with the ERA-NETs ICT-AGRI and RURAGRI is being sought. CORE Organic II will suggest topics of mutual interest which will be discussed by ICT-AGRI and RURAGRI.

Funding by the true common pot would be a way to ensure funding of transnational research of the highest quality and with a lower administrative burden for the researchers. The existing legal, policy, administrative and project/programme barriers in the partner countries have been explored in CORE Organic II. Only a few countries are able to join the true common pot at this point, and if these countries have a common interest in a narrow research area, the true common pot will be tested in the second call. For future calls, recommendations to the partner countries on how to make the use of the true common pot or mixed mode possible have been prepared.

Stakeholder involvement at national level for research prioritisation has been explored in the partner countries of CORE Organic II. Based on the collected information and a literature review, suggestions were made for countries in the process of developing a good practice for stakeholder involvement. Furthermore, a plan of action for transnational stakeholder involvement in relation to CORE Organic II activities has been drawn up.

Monitoring and evaluation of the funded research projects are tasks that go beyond the lifetime of the ERA-NET. The experiences gained from monitoring and evaluation of the CORE Organic I pilot projects, the needs and requirements from the new partner countries and recommendations from ERA-LEARN will form the basis of a model to organise efficient and transparent project monitoring of CORE Organic II projects. Templates for deliveries, annual abstracts, midterm and final reports are being prepared, as well as evaluation forms.

To identify appropriate ways for disseminating results to stakeholders and end-users on a national and transnational level, the best practice of dissemination used in the eight CORE Organic I projects and the best practices used in the national projects funded by the partners have been explored, and a report is under preparation.

CORE Organic II seeks to increase synergy with other ERA-NETs through mutual learning and joint development of tools for proposal handling, evaluation and for project monitoring.

Potential applications

At the end of CORE Organic II, there will be a strong network of partners, all the elements necessary for the effective continuation of the collaboration, a series of ongoing transnational research projects, and a plan and structure to support dissemination. The network will have gained experience in the coordination and management of parallel calls and projects, and will be well prepared to continue collaboration beyond the termination of CORE Organic II.

CORE Organic II will maximise the efficiency in use of research funds across countries, by facilitating channelling of significant parts of national research funding budgets for organic agriculture and food into common pots for transnational projects. It should therefore reduce duplication of research across Europe, and increase collaboration within costly research facilities.

By using a common approach, the ERA-NET will increase the quality and common relevance of research in organic farming and food systems. The network will offer support to researcher consortia with complementary competencies and best available methods and facilities. CORE Organic II will ensure the high scientific quality of research, inter alia, by the independent expert evaluation of project proposals using state-of-the-art scientific evaluation criteria. The ERA-NET will promote the excellence of research by organising monitoring of the selected research projects, ensuring interactions with the project teams and developing tools for impact assessment.

Through joint efforts, the ERA-NET can successfully address, with excellent research and innovation, the most important areas of common interest where organic farming and food systems need improvement in order to fulfil important objectives in terms of sustainability, food safety and quality, climate change adaptation, animal health and welfare and other important aspects of the organic food chain. CORE Organic II will develop the perspective of European funding bodies on the priorities for organic research (with appropriate links to other networks and organisations active in organic agriculture and with a sufficient volume).

Innovation contribution

The dissemination of research results will be optimised by dissemination to all partner organisations and not only the funding bodies of the specific project. Each project will have a dissemination sub-site related to the coreorganicII.org site. Newsletters will be produced for dissemination in all partner countries. Efficient dissemination and communication will be targeted to European organic farming journals, magazines and other media as well as relevant stakeholders and decision-makers across Europe in order to ensure maximum impact of the project results.

Organic Eprints, an international open access archive for papers related to research in organic agriculture, will be used by all funded research projects to publish all results gained. Each partner country of CORE Organic II has appointed a National Editor of Organic Eprints that will help to increase the National use of the archive in the partner countries.

The use of these two instruments will ensure that the results of research projects are widely available to the stakeholders and end users concerned, and that they are effectively used to the benefit of the organic sector and European society.

Conclusions

It is too premature to draw final conclusions, however the objective of the CORE Organic II will be reached as the first call has already been carried out.

It will, however, be a challenge to secure funding for a continuation of the collaboration. The partners will have to fund an efficient secretariat to take care of coordination, calls, proposals and projects, including the monitoring of progress of funded projects and dissemination efforts. In addition, partners have to meet physically at least twice per year to prioritise research and select projects for funding. Several models for continuation will have to be considered.