

Impact of the dynamics of discourses on the development of organic farming in Flanders (Belgium)

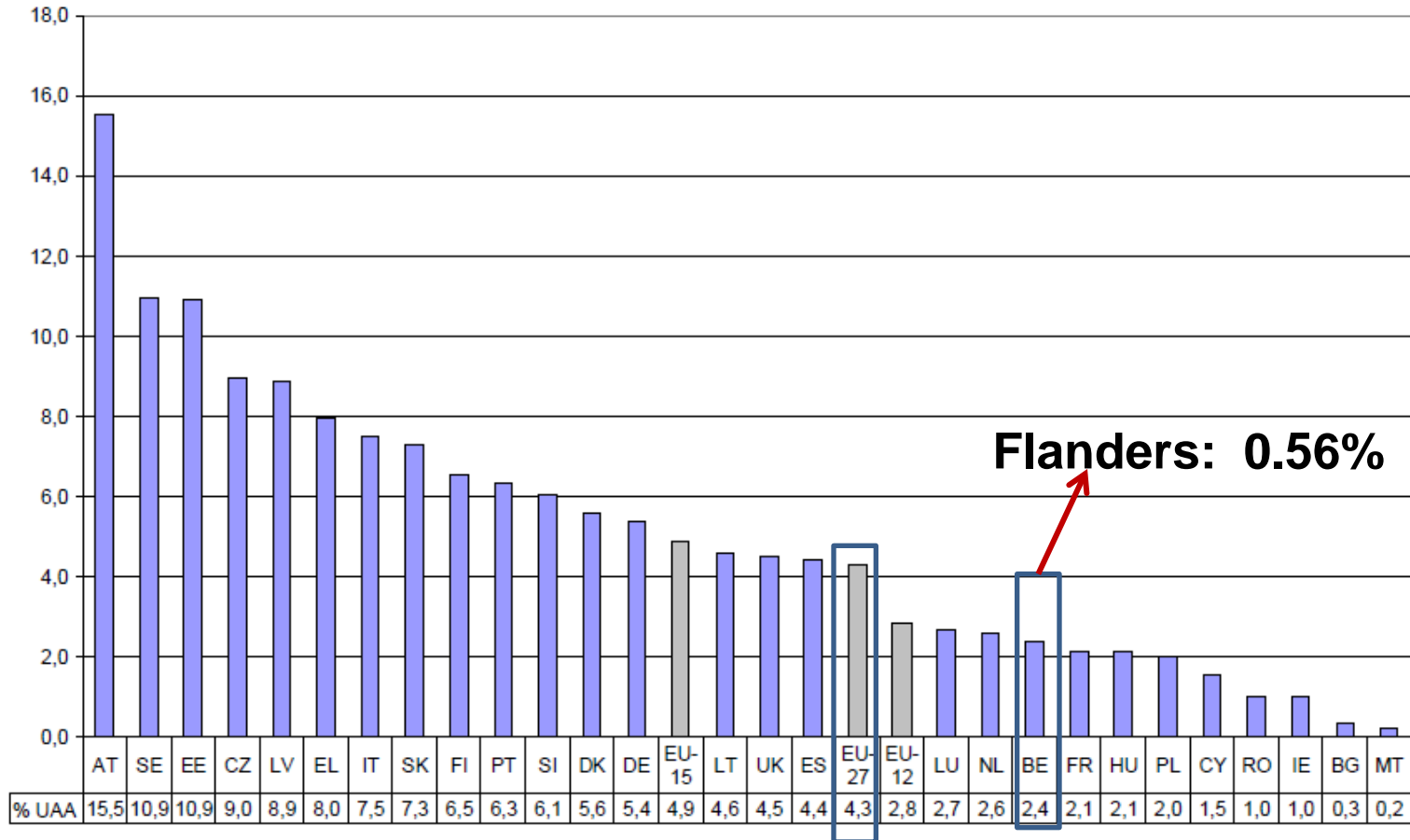
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NJF-seminar: 'Organic farming systems as a driver for change'
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Background



Share of the organic area in the UAA in the EU-27, 2008 (%)

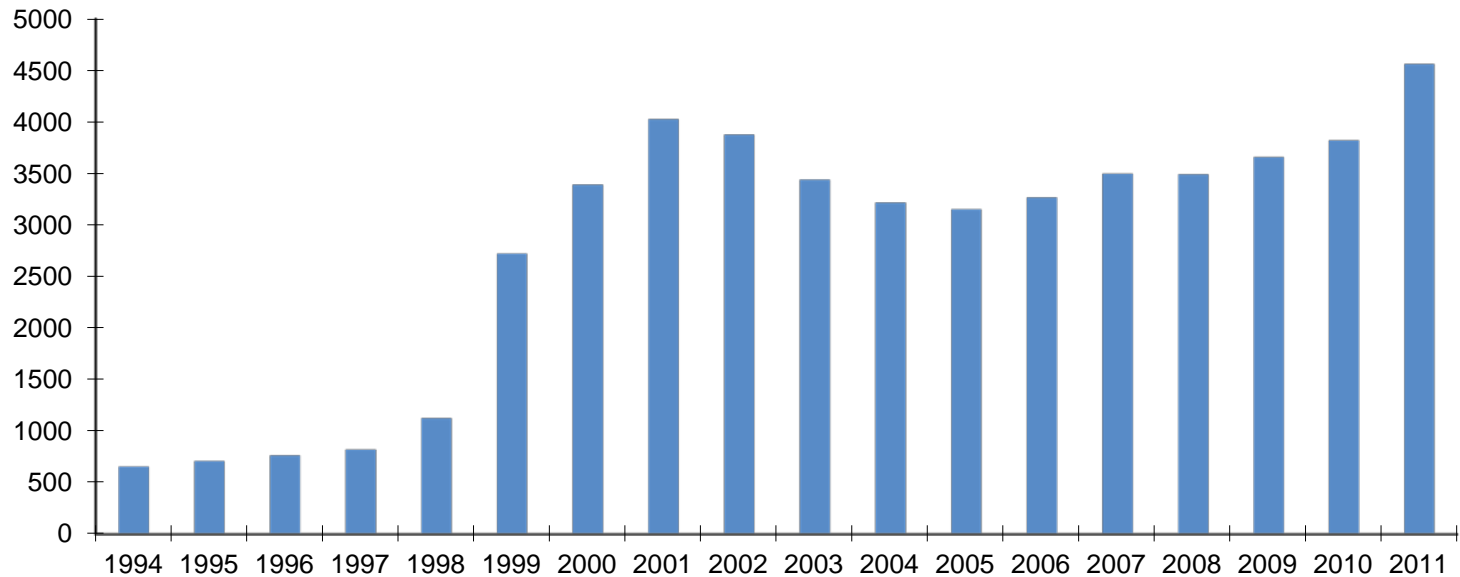


Source: Eurostat, 2007 for BE, CY, IE, LU, MT and PT. AT: alpine pastures included (data from MAFEWM)

Background



Total organic area in Flanders in hectares between 1994 and 2011



- In 2011, 0.7% of organic area in UAA in Flanders despite:
 - increasing consumers market for organic products
 - high import of organic products
 - efforts by government and organic organisations

Aims



- to gain insights in the development of the organic sector in Flanders
- exploring an approach inspired by a critical discourse analyse because:
 - *analyses from a institutional point of view*
 - *Actor-oriented analyses*

Not offer a complete understanding of the evolution of the organic farming sector in Flanders

Aims



- Using approach inspired by a critical discourse analyse by studying:
 - *differences in discourses on organic farming within different area of agricultural community*
 - *how dynamics in discourses on organic farming interrelated to development of agricultural institutions and practices*
 - *how struggles centring on the **relative dominance** of these **discourse** have played a pivotal role in the development of the organic production in Flanders*

Data and analyses



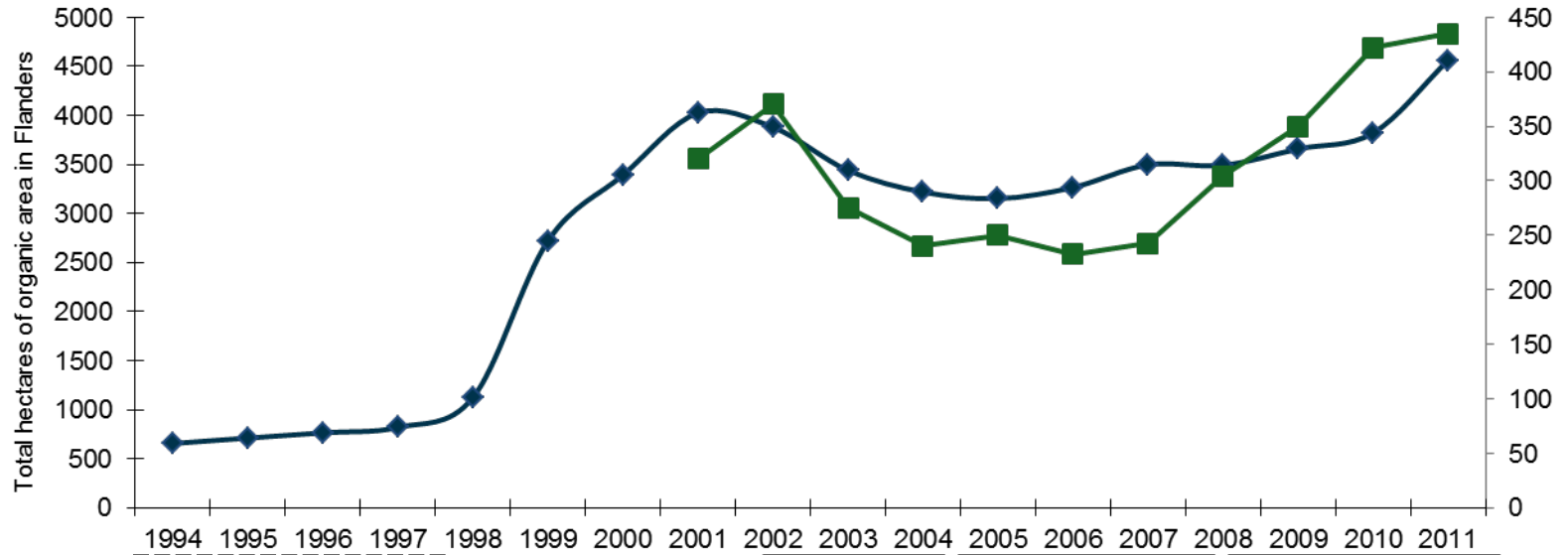
- Use of multiple data sources:
 - **Semi- structured interviews** with key representatives of organic and conventional farming community, Flemish agricultural policy field and (conventional) market field
 - **Grey literature documents** collected between 1998 and 2011
 - **Broad own experiences**, involved in organic sector studies during the considered period
 - **Official statistics**

Data and analyses



- Analyses:
 - reflexive iterative process
 - *delineation of 3 analytically distinct discourses up to 1998*
 - *discourse linked to coalitions of actors in 4 areas of the agricultural community*
 - *developments in discourses in coalitions and their relative dominance up to 2011*
 - *connecting discourses to organic policy and market developments and evolutions in number of organic farmers, area of land devoted to organic production and organic food consumers' expenditures*
 - *5 different time periods defined*

Results



Total organic food consumers expenditures in Belgium (mio €)

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Organic Farming Community	agro-ecological	agro-ecological														market		
																market		
Conventional Farming Community	agro-industrial	agro-industrial														agro-industrial		
		market														market		
Flemish Agricultural Policy Field	agro-industrial	agro-ecological														agro-industrial		
		agro-industrial														market		
Conventional Food Market	agro-industrial	agro-industrial														agro-industrial		
		market														market		

Results



5 different time periods

- Up to 1998: emergence of different discourses
 - *Gradually growth of the organic sector*
- 1998 - 2002: agro-ecological discourse moves towards dominance
 - *Exponentially growth of the organic sector*
- 2002 - 2004: reinforcement of differences between discourses
 - *Shrinking of the organic sector*
- 2004 - 2008: need for change in discourses
 - *Struggle with stagnation*
- 2008 – 2011: power of a common discourse
 - *Revival of organic sector*

Results



Up to 1998: emergence of different discourses

- Diametrically opposed discourses:
 - **Agro ecological discourse** advocated by organic pioneers often from outside agricultural community
 - **Agro industrial discourse** advocated by conventional farmers' unions and policy makers
 - Organic organisations start out of private initiatives, functioning as non profit organisations with no connections with conventional counterparts
 - EU regulations implemented but organic farming further barely mentioned in official policy documents
- Food crises and scandals in the 1990's and legislative recognition
 - Emergence of a market for organic products
 - Gradually increase of interest of conventional farmers to convert
 - Recognition of the **market discourse**
 - **Gradually growth of organic consumption and production**

Results



1998 - 2002: agro-ecological discourse moves towards dominance

- Different scandals and crises related to agri-environmental and food safety problems with the 1999's dioxin crisis in Belgium
 - Increase dominance of the agro ecological discourse in different agricultural area, also more and more embedded within agricultural community
 - market discourse recognized within one of the farmers' unions in parallel to an agro industrial discourse,
 - organic consultant appointed to advice interested member farmers, but accordingly to market discourse pursued no proactive policy to convince farmers to convert
- Election of Flemish Green party Minister of Agriculture in 1999
 - Agro ecological discourse enters the political decision making
 - First action plans and release of extra resources
- Establishment of organic branch stores by large supermarkets
 - Picking up the market discourse
- Establishment of Federal Agency for Safety of Food Chain (FAVV) by conventional farmers' unions and policy makers in 2001.





2002 - 2004: reinforcement of differences between discourses

- Belgian state reform with regionalisation of Ministry of Agriculture
 - Still led by a Green party minister and inspired by the agro ecological discourse
 - Continuation of action plan with specific actions in favour of organic farming
 - But increased criticism of this policy by conventional farming community
 - Dominance of agro industrial discourse reinforced
- Consumers confidence in agricultural production system was restored and retards growth of organic consumption
 - Establishment of Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain
 - First scandals in organic production sector

→ **Shrinking of the organic sector**



2004 - 2008: need for change in discourses

- Green party was not re-elected into Flemish Government
 - New Minister of Agriculture, Christian democrat and former employee of conventional farmers' union principally advocated the agro industrial discourse
- Organic and conventional sector forced to create a shared perspective on future of organic farming to further release resources for organic
 - Struggle with years of discursive contestation
 - External facilitator to create trust and constructive communication
 - Adoption of a common market discourse within Strategic Plan for Organic Farming
- Discursive shift facilitated by changes in personnel within conventional and organic farmers' union

→ **Struggle with stagnation in production and consumption**



2008 – 2011: power of a common discourse

- Strategic Plan for Organic Farming signed by conventional and organic farmers' unions and Ministry of Agriculture
 - Shared responsibilities for determining aims, actions and budget allocation from a market discourse point of view
- Common projects to support organic sector in Flanders
 - “Bio zkt Boer”, aims to facilitate conventional farmers' conversion to organic agriculture
 - “Bio zkt Keten”, aims to facilitate a market for organic products
 - Suffers of contradictions in the advocated market discourse of strategic plan and conventional retailers not partners in the plan
 - Outside SPOF conflicting opinions out of agro ecological and agro industrial discourse still exist

→ a revival of the organic production

Discussion



- Competition between two mutually exclusive understandings of organic farming structured debates on the future of two last decades
 - Development of an organic sector separately of the conventional sector
 - Organic sector fragmented and little politically powerful
- Markedly increase of organic production when agro industrial discourse lost dominance
- Agro ecological inspired policy released extra resources for deploying demand- and market-driven measures → further formal institutionalisation
- Novel political-institutional framework could not guarantee long term growth
 - Agro industrial discourse still dominant within conventional farmers' unions and farmers
 - Instead of bringing organic and conventional close, a re-polarisation of discourses
 - Limitation of success of initiatives taken by policymakers and organic organisations
- Common market discourse facilitate cooperation between organic and conventional sector by focus on a single market within SPOF
- Cooperation allowed an organic policy based on common agreements avoiding fierce contestations and contribute to success of initiatives taken

Discussion



Future:

- Supermarkets absent in this common market discourse inspired SPOF although substantially contributed in increase of consumption.
 - Supermarkets should promote more Flemish organic products or/and
 - Flemish farmers should increase competitiveness on the EU market
- Challenges to the organic sector's foundational agro ecological discourse.
 - Influence of conventional farmers' unions on the allocation of organic resources
 - Introduction of more 'conventional' ideas in organic community
 - Fear of dilution of the agro ecological identity and 'conventionalisation' of organic production

Conclusions



- Discursive dynamics have played important role in determining development of OFF in Flanders
 - Co-shape political and institutional changes
 - Mediate effect of these changes on individual actors decisions
 - Focus on institutional changes and individual decisions to convert is useful but only partly explains organic sector developments
- Political and institutional change should be supported by actors from different agricultural fields
 - Dependent on presence of discourse in these fields
- Context specific conditions
 - E.g. Food crises and scandals
 - Individual actors in coalitions
- Research restricted to farmers' unions, policy makers and supermarkets
 - also other actors role in developments in agriculture

Thank you for your attention!

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