

18th Organic World Congress

Written inputs from panelists of the Main Track Session

8A: **Institution building:**
Organic Agriculture in the landscape of sustainability initiatives
(Panel discussion)

Tuesday, 14 October 2014 (16:30-18.00)

Institution Building: Organic Agriculture in the landscape of sustainability initiatives

Background

Organic is not the only initiative with the aim of improving sustainability in agriculture. There is a wide array of approaches, perspectives, priorities and levels of ambition. Certain initiatives are seen as complimentary to Organic Agriculture and use it as a basis. Others are viewed as followers, competitors or "due to lower sustainability requirements" even as "greenwashers". As not all assessments of standards and impacts recognize a leading position for Organic farming, there is room for improvement.

Session Objectives

The aim of the session is to collectively map out the landscape of sustainability initiatives and to learn about their objectives, their positioning and their strengths and weaknesses. We will pinpoint lessons that the Organic Movement can learn from outside initiatives and what efforts are needed to make organic institutions more effective and competitive.

Leading Questions

- What are the main sustainability initiatives and how are they characterized?
- What are the importance, the strength and the impact of other sustainability initiatives, compared to organics? What can we learn from them?
- What potential synergies, alliances and collaboration could improve the organic impact?
- How do we differentiate ourselves and how do we communicate the distinction?
- What are the strategic and communication implications for the Organic Movement given the existence of other initiatives?
- Which institutions do we need to make organic more successful?

Methodology: Panel discussion with 4-5 panelists.

Moderator/Rapporteur: Mathew John/Thomas Cierpka

Speakers

- Diane Bowen, IFOAM, USA
- Lara Koritzke, ISEAL Alliance, UK
- Andrew Lawson, University of New England, Australia
- Cecilia Sundberg, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden

Andrew Lawson¹

Short biography: Andrew Lawson is a researcher with qualifications in law and rural science, currently pursuing a doctorate on the role of voluntary environmental certification programs for farmers and their potential value in partnered governance arrangements. As a part of his research, he is investigating two organic farming case studies, as well as an EMS-type system. He grew up on a farm and has worked in Landcare (a grassroots rural environmental movement in Australia), as well as a national natural resources research organization called Land & Water Australia. Before commencing his PhD in 2012, he worked in Hong Kong on urban environmental issues for a local NGO Civic Exchange.

IDEAS ON THE LEADING QUESTIONS

1. What are the main sustainability initiatives and how are they characterized?

Possible discussion points:

- There are hundreds of sustainability initiatives and many ways to characterize.
- Process-oriented vs. Performance oriented, as well as hybrids
- Local vs. International
- Government vs non-government
- Industry specific vs. general
- Issue specific vs. holistic
- Intrinsically vs. extrinsically driven

2. What are the importance, the strength and the impact of other sustainability initiatives, compared to organics? What can we learn from them?

Possible discussion points:

- Common criticisms and perceptions of organic systems: Over-emphasis on chemical-free farming, rather than impacts on the environment. Encourages obsessive expectations in consumers about food purity, rather than engaging them to become partners in the complex project of sustainable land management.
- Strengths of other initiatives: Conscious focus on farmers' impacts on the environment. Wider perspective beyond pest, diseases, and soil fertility, to water resources management, nature conservation, carbon/energy issues, as well as capacity building and continuous improvement.

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3. What potential synergies, alliances and collaboration could improve the organic impact?

Possible discussion points:

- Links with issue specific programs, such as water stewardship and biodiversity conservation.
- Alliances with complementary processes, such as continuous improvement initiatives (e.g. EMS)
- Collaboration with local natural resource management authorities.

4. How do we differentiate ourselves and how do we communicate the distinction?

Possible discussion points:

- Unique democratic and inclusive governance structure in relation to standards.
- Successful exemplar of a value chain working towards internalizing the environmental costs of farming.
- The creativity and holistic thinking that arises in relation to problem-solving as a result of the discipline imposed by restricted access to chemical inputs.

5. What are the strategic and communication implications for the Organic Movement given the existence of other initiatives?

Possible discussion points:

- The risk borne by farmers when they decide to take the organic pathway, compared with perceived benefits of some other system or initiative that provides them with environmental marketing credentials but allows access to conventional pesticides and fertilizers.
- Continuing education of the organic customer to ensure farming doesn't fall victim to urban sentimentalism or marketing myths.
- Ensuring that organic standards work to nurture a land ethic characterized by farmers embedded socially and culturally in their landscapes, rather than as tools of convenience by which multi-national agri-businesses and food conglomerates discipline or push out smaller scale producers.

6. Which institutions do we need to make organic more successful?

Possible discussion points:

- Research institutions: quantifying or articulating the benefits of organic production. Making linkages between compliance with an organic standard and achieving on-ground environmental and social outcomes.
- Institutional protection of the organic concept via trade practices and consumer protection regulation.
- Collaborative partnership and co-regulatory arrangements with public authorities.
- Critical thinking about current institutions – Do organic standards encourage responsibility, build self-efficacy, reinforce intrinsic pro-environment motivations, and help farmers internalize norms of sustainable behaviours? Or will they become an externally driven, quasi-regulatory approach?

Cecilia Sundberg²

Institution Building: Life cycle assessment (LCA)

What are the main sustainability initiatives and how are they characterized?

In research and policy-making in Europe, life cycle assessment (LCA) has emerged as a leading methodology for sustainability assessment. Its strengths is its science-based production-oriented cradle-to-grave approach, and its ambition to include and quantify all environmental impacts and summarise them in a few figures for decision-makers. The LCA community is organised through a couple of research journals, scientific conferences, international standardisation as well as more or less commercial software and database developers. There is a bi-annual LCA-food conference. Through scientists at the JRC (Joint Research Centre of the European Commission) the LCA community has strong influence on European environmental policy making.

Some new food labels, most notable carbon footprint labels are based standards such as PAS2050 and ISO14067 which rests on LCA methodology. An important distinction is that CF concerns only climate impact, whereas LCA includes many environmental impacts, such as eutrophication and acidification.

What are the importance, the strength and the impact of other sustainability initiatives, compared to organics? What can we learn from them?

In LCAs comparing organic and conventional food produced in Europe, organic food often do not come out as more environmentally sustainable than conventional food. This risks reinforcing scepticism towards organic food among agronomists, agricultural engineers and food scientists – even those that have an interest in environmental issues and training in systems thinking. The reason for this outcome in comparative LCAs is that LCA is best fit for quantifying energy and mass flows, and has limited capacity to encompass more complex, indirect environmental processes such as biodiversity. Consequently, as an example: the negative effects of high need for feed for production of organic animal-based foods compared to conventional animal production, are clearly visible in LCAs, whereas positive effects on biodiversity are rarely quantified.

² Cecilia Sundberg, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

What can we learn from them?

The LCA methodology is good for identifying inefficiencies and point-source pollution in production systems, and for comparing the importance of different sources of the same type of pollutant. Results from LCAs are important for identifying where in the life cycle of products the major sources of environmental impacts are. This is needed for improving the environmental performance of organic agriculture.

What potential synergies, alliances and collaboration could improve the organic impact?

There are researchers who drive the development of LCA to improve methods and data availability to better include more environmental aspects, including those addressed by organic farming (in addition to biodiversity, toxicity and indirect land use effects are issues where methods in LCA are insufficient). Improving those methodologies is important not only for the organic movement, but for LCA to be able to provide policy-makers with the comprehensive decisions-support for sustainable agriculture that they expect and need.

How do we differentiate ourselves and how do we communicate the distinction?

Key messages: Organic agriculture has a wide scope, it is not just about environmental sustainability and reducing quantifiable direct environmental impacts. The LCA methodology needs further development in order to fulfil expectations on being a decision-support tool for sustainable agriculture.

What are the strategic and communication implications for the Organic Movement given the existence of other initiatives?

The Organic Movement should not risk a clash with the eco-efficiency-paradigm manifested in LCA, but prevent it by establishing a dialogue around science-based methods for assessing agricultural sustainability. The Organic Movement should get in touch with some LCA researchers for a dialogue on (i) the development of LCA of foods and (ii) communication of results from LCAs of organic food.

Which institutions do we need to make organic more successful?

The formation of TIPI is important.

Diane Bowen³

Short Biography

I have been engaged in the organic sector for more than 20 years, including 12 years working as part of the IFOAM staff. My original interest in working in this sector stemmed from my respect for organic agriculture as the first and foremost standards and labeling scheme to influence transformation to more environmentally sustainable practices. My first positions in organic agriculture were in organic certification. My area of concentration in IFOAM has been on organic guarantee systems, including management of the IFOAM Organic Guarantee System. From 2004 to 2007 I served as IFOAM's representative on the Board of the ISEAL Alliance, where I networked and problem-solved with other sustainability standards and labeling organizations. Since 2006, I have been focused on reducing barriers to organic trade that result from the proliferation of organic standards and technical regulations. I managed activities of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture from 2003-2008 and the Global Organic Market Access project from 2009-2012. I am currently engaged with the new Working Group on Interoperability of Sustainability Standards within the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards, where I am dealing with both organic and GAP standards schemes.

What I could bring to the panel

In addition to deep experience in the organic sustainability initiative, I know about the array of initiatives in sustainable agriculture, including those rooted in standards and labeling, and other initiatives coming from both ends of a spectrum, from grassroots movements (e.g. urban agriculture) to globalized supply chains (e.g PepsiCo). My career has also given me exposure to organizational development. I served IFOAM both as a consultant and staff member in certain organizational development pursuits.

My view of organic agriculture in the array of sustainable agriculture initiatives

Organic agriculture is differentiated from all others by its systems-based, regenerative paradigm, focus on soil organic matter and soil health, safeguarding against agro-pollution due to its strict avoidance of synthetic and potentially toxic inputs in production and processing systems, and strong association by consumers with the most healthy and safe products. Relatively recently, it also has clearly elaborated core principles and objectives of organic agriculture. However, the principles are not equally emphasized in organic standards. Its standards scheme is actually a myriad of decentralized private and government standards, which can constitute barriers to trade. It is the only initiative where government standards schemes are prevalent. The organic agriculture initiative is also a vibrant and uniquely diverse movement, which is characterized not only by standards schemes, but also by public

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policy advocacy, extension- training-academics (even to the extent of university curricula), and scientific research. Its principles and objectives are addressed in multiple dimensions, not only in standards and product labeling. It is concerned with all participants in the movement from the smallest subsistence producers and communities, to larger businesses and supply chains. What a feat over the last half-century! I am proud to be a part!

Other sustainable agriculture initiatives

The many initiatives— there are hundreds— could be mapped in multiple dimensions according to:

- **Center** Whether they are centered on core agriculture and trade, or more on people and community (e.g. urban agriculture, local food movements)
- **Origin** whether based on social movements (fair trade), or on mutual interest coalitions of corporations, NGOs, academics etc. or multinational companies (e.g. PepsiCo).
- **Strategy** whether they are a standards scheme or engage in broader (or other) means to achieve their sustainable agriculture goals, which include projects, codes, and tools.
- **Level** whether “entry level” (first steps to less unsustainable practices) to best practices characterized by paradigm shift for agriculture (organic).
- **Scope** whether they cover all of agriculture or focus on a limited scope (e.g. specific commodities) • **Breadth** what performance criteria for sustainability they address (e.g. environmental, animal welfare, social, economic)

What we can learn and possibly apply from other sustainability initiatives

The learning and application can be the areas of:

- scaling up strategies (without compromising our core system)
- measurability for both compliance and indicators
- persuasion and fund development (e.g. Rainforest Alliance has a large UNDC grant to expand their private certification label. Is organic perceived as “too niche” to attract this kind of support?)

Potential Alliances and Cooperation (Just a few representative ideas)

- Dual certification options with other certification-based schemes • Outreach to share knowledge, research on organic systems with other schemes
- Engage with grassroots movements in order to instill organic knowledge, messages and credibility labels in their movements.

Which institutions (and resources) do we need to make organic more successful?

- Engage more with the large supply chains, even though they may not represent the ultimate vision of sustainable food and agriculture systems.

This could involve cooperation with some other sustainable agriculture certification schemes.

- We need a (“third party”?) way to hear feedback on organic from outside our sector, without taking offense and turning off our hearing. We are sometimes the victims of our high idealism.

Lara Koritzke⁴

Session Objectives

The aim of the session is to collectively map out the landscape of sustainability initiatives and to learn about their objectives, their positioning and their strengths and weaknesses. We will pinpoint lessons that the Organic Movement can learn from outside initiatives and what efforts are needed to make organic institutions more effective and competitive.

Leading Questions

What are the main sustainability initiatives and how are they characterized? We can talk here a bit about standards and tools with different objectives. How some are focused on eliminating the worst practices, while others are focused on recognizing higher practices. Some look at a single attribute (e.g. non-GMO, non-child labour), while others look at multiple ones. Some are focused on production processes (most agriculture standards), others on the entire supply chain (Responsible jewellery council for example). Some focus on practices (Rainforest Alliance, Organic), while others focus on outcomes (Bonsucro).

What are the importance, the strength and the impact of other sustainability initiatives, compared to organics? What can we learn from them?

Impacts is really the key question now. So many of the initiatives outside of organics are being asked to demonstrate their impact now or else they will become obsolete. Many are responding to this call. Some are not. For example, UTZ just put out their first impacts report. It showed some positive, some negative. But there were positives. They are also doing a good job being transparent and responding to all independent studies.

Meanwhile, others are still having trouble doing that. There is an increasing focus on things like economic impacts, quality impacts. Are farmers more efficient? Are they doing more with less? Are their yields higher and their incomes higher so they don't abandon their cocoa farms? What about living wage and how to affect the seasonal workers of the world? How does this translate into living income for small farmers? The impacts questions are being grappled with, and some sustainability initiative are doing a good job of showing results. The COSA study is one we can talk about. Or the recent one from Sustaineo that said the "bulk of the evidence" is showing that certification in small holder agriculture is mostly positive.

What potential synergies, alliances and collaboration could improve the organic impact?

We are seeing more collaborations now. More than ever before. The belief I think of many of us is that by working together we can all become more effective, learn from each other, reduce burdens and costs, and ultimately scale up our impacts. Because it's all about impacts. So, one big problem is access for small holders. And costs of certification. Even here in Canada where I live I continue to hear complaints of the cost of certification. So, some

⁴ Director of Development and Communications, ISEAL Alliance

collaboration cases we can talk about are certification systems coming together to explore joint audits. The ISEAL pesticides working group (trying to harmonize the banned pesticides list to help make it easier for small holders to comply with standards). Living wage collaborations happening now...there is a big one going on with Fairtrade, UTZ, RA, FSC, SAI and a joint statement was just issued. They plan to collaborate on a common methodology to measure it, on a set of benchmarks, and other longer-term plans. Ultimately we hope to see that the content of their standards will improve because of this.

How do we differentiate ourselves and how do we communicate the distinction?

Well, I would say that your biggest distinction is your scale, your reach. And also your specific content focus that is unlike other agriculture standards systems.

What are the strategic and communication implications for the Organic Movement given the existence of other initiatives?

Well I can say, coming from my own background in ISEAL and being a bit outside (although incredibly supportive) of IFOAM and organic is that it will be important for the Organic Movement to talk about social benefits, income, cost, and also yields in the coming future. And impact. ☺

Which institutions do we need to make organic more successful?

Come back to ISEAL and work with all of us. We miss you!