Organic Food Systems: Do they produce healthy diets?

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**Implications**

European studies show that people who prefer organic food also follow overall healthier diets, i.e. they eat more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains, less meat, with an apparently lower environmental impact. This interplay of organic food preference and dietary patterns needs more attention. National or regional nutrition surveys in planning could include questions designed to collect data on the nature of organic consumption and even food literacy in order to verify or refute these first observations. Addressing the question of healthy diets requires epidemiological studies and connects with public health nutrition considerations. In turn this links with the Principle of Health, one of four guiding Principles giving orientation to the organic sector.

However, the organic product range is growing especially in the convenience and snack categories, which are typically associated with increased levels of processing, trans fats, salt and sugar content. At the same time dietary guidelines are shifting from a nutrient-based approach towards a wider approach linking both food product and food production processes. Food-based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG) are including such aspects restrictively. A critical appraisal of the organic assortment seems indicated. Foodstuffs that come from a food system in alignment with natural cycles should give rise to a healthy and sustainable diet. If not, we should be looking for disruptions.

**Background and objectives**

When considering the question of health in organic food and farming, the focus has largely been on comparing individual products produced according to organic or conventional practices. However, health is the product of diet i.e. the pattern of foods eaten over a longer period of time, and diet is one of many health determinants. Hence the search for evidence of better health outcomes in the organic food system also needs to be considered at the diet level and even at the social practice level.

**Key results and discussion**

Even though no “Organic Diet” with the customary characteristic of food-based recommendations or prohibitions can be identified in popular science style books on alternative diets, the organic market is growing in many countries. These markets afford access to consumers that may consume a significant amount of organic produce on a regular basis. In two such national markets (France and Germany) national nutrition surveys including organic consumption data exist. Analysis of regular consumers of organic products in both cohorts shows that organic consumers exhibit a better dietary pattern (more plant food-based) and a food choice that better fits food-based and nutritional recommendations. Additionally, in the German cohort a positive relationship between healthy dietary patterns, nutrition knowledge and a healthy lifestyle was also found. Furthermore, they are markedly less overweight and obese, have a higher level of physical activity, follow a non-smoking regimen and have healthier life-style profiles.

A further field for exploration of this may be provided by school meal systems. Studies show that schools with a healthy-food policy also support organic food; alternatively said, an organic school policy can promote healthy eating. This may underline the importance of organic food in public procurement for the education sector.

Organic food consumption patterns seem to be close to both recommended healthy dietary patterns as well as sustainable diet patterns. The association between dietary patterns and food choices seems of great importance and therefore needs further study.

**How work was carried out?**

Representative consumer studies such as national nutrition surveys with stratifiable data on organic consumption were investigated and selected for study.

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