Consumer attitudes towards the quality and safety of organic and low input foods

Peter Midmore, Mette Wier, and Raffaele Zanoli

***Abstract* – A review of scientific literature and analysis of recent qualitative data provides new insights into the dynamics of the demand side of the organic market. Differences between existing, committed and 'new' consumers have implications for wider organic research, policy development and marketing strategy, particularly as actual behaviour and product loyalty diverge from the conventional representation of consumer characteristics.** [1]

INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews evidence from surveys and interpretations of consumer expectations and attitudes towards safety, quality and cost of organic and low input foods, based on Midmore et al. (2005). Its main sections draw together conclusions of this analysis and update of previous FP5 literature reviews[2] and qualitative data re-analysis, and the final section raises issues for discussion.

RECENT LITERATURE ON ORGANIC CONSUMER CHARACTERISTICS

Recent literature displays a range of methodological styles and reference frames, from direct focus on consumer attitudes and investigations of organic buying behaviour to conceptual social science studies of the role of the organic sector in social and cultural change. Theoretical frameworks range from behavioural approaches (consumer knowledge, product perception or needs), to those emphasising social, cultural or institutional relationships.

Strong 'merit good' features are associated with implicit organic quality dimensions: use of natural raw materials, welfare-orientated animal husbandry, and environmentally-friendly land use and processing techniques, contributing not only to individual benefits in terms of healthy eating, but also to social and environmental goals. This intricacy reveals two different but related aspects of quality. Sensory and organoleptic attributes of organic food products, experienced directly by consumers, include size, colour, form, taste, smell and 'feel'. However, the significance of physical attributes may be peripheral since there is no guarantee that food has been produced organically merely if it smells good or tastes different. A recurring concern is that the organic quality of food cannot be assessed simply by looking at it; thus it must be assured through credible industry standards. Such certification is crucially important to perception of 'extrinsic' quality and also safety of organic foods; this incorporates intangible characteristics focused on organic quality as a symbol of sustainable agriculture and healthy living, interwoven with process-related quality and the use of safe or natural raw materials. These indirectly experienced, credence characteristics are underpinned by trust in organic criteria.

The most intangible aspects of quality perception are found in the emotional sphere. Critically important to consumers, yet difficult to evaluate, they are bounded by subjective and relatively vague attitudes towards lifestyle and *raison d'etre*, resting on beliefs in products' socio-economic and environmental context. Benefits are associated with health, safety and environmental soundness, as 'pure' or natural, as low input, as produced without using GM technology. Ethical issues include fair trade, third world impacts, animal welfare and local or regional production. 'Feel good' factors are also linked to the desire to achieve exclusivity; conversely, although with less prevalence, purchasers may wish to avoid identification with some types of consumers (such as 'hippies').

PANEL DATA

Households' stated and actual behaviour with regard to organic purchasing was studied between 1997-2003 in Denmark (with the highest per capita European consumption of organics) and Britain (with the fastest growing market). Consumers were grouped by level of purchase (heavy, medium, light users and non-users). The results reinforce issues raised above concerning market extent and growth, socio-demographic factors, sales channels and labelling; however, two factors emerge as of particular interest. First, whilst average organic budget shares in each group are stable (in Denmark) or growing (in the UK), a significant number of families move from one consumer group to another. In Britain, 25% of heavy users in 2001 became medium users, 7% became light users and, most surprisingly, 20% became non-users. In Denmark, around one third of those who were heavy users in 1997 were either medium users by 2001, or even (although to a lesser extent) light users.

Peter Midmore, School of Management and Business, The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK-SY23 3DD; Mette Wier, Institute of Local Government Studies (AKF), Nyropsgade 37, DK-1602; Raffaele Zanoli, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Via Brecce Bianche, Ancona, IT-60131

[2] www.origin-food.org/; www.irs.aber.ac.uk/omiard/; www.organichaccp.org/.

Second, in Denmark, combining information on various stated private and public good attributes of organic goods with actual purchase behaviour (through regression, logit, and micro-econometric demand models), private good attributes *alone* have a significant effect on the organic budget share; the contribution from stated public good attributes is not significant. Even though households often assign the highest values to public good attributes, it is valued private good attributes that make them buy organic.

Focus group and laddering interviews

The OMIaRD project undertook qualitative market research which explored consumer behaviour, perceptions and attitudes in eight European countries. The raw qualitative material contained much of interest on consumer motivations and attitudes concerning organic, low input and origin-labelled product food quality and safety. Summarising, strong differentiation exists between views of regular and occasional consumers; for regular consumers, quality is a bundle of linked attributes involving experiential and imbued characteristics, and relies on acceptance that organic farming will deliver them. This is *not* reflected in the attitudes of occasional consumers; they have the same concerns but lack adequate knowledge and trust in certification.

Committed consumers do not constitute a saturated market: wider product ranges and more competition allow better choice among both products and outlets, increasing their overall loyalty to the product category. Consumers have become more interested in local orientation as well as in the origin labels of organic food, because increasing distance from production to consumption. Location of production plays a role in terms promoting trust, perceptions of freshness and traditional quality, and it can also help improve local economic self-reliance. Lower purchasing growth by occasional consumers reflects perceptions of poor value for money, fewer recent food scandals and 'mainstreaming' of organic products. For the vast majority of consumers, organic is stuck in the development phase of the product life-cycle. Quality dimensions and considerations are among the most important aspects in any food purchase but consumers usually connect it to health or to safety, but not to actual food quality perception.

Discussion

Consumer attitudes towards the quality of organic food are complex, vague, unstable, and link food to health, environment, ethics and identity; their requirements are also sometimes contradictory. They broadly agree that safety is part of quality rather than a separate entity, associating it with anxieties about possibly harmful substances but expressing little concern about real health risks.

Core organic consumers are committed to the extent that organic products represent the quality and safety characteristics that they seek, yet growth will only come from those who are as yet uncommitted organic consumers. This group is more price and convenience sensitive, and market expansion may rely on achieving scale economies in distribution and greater levels of processing, shifting the emphasis into more profit-oriented supply chains. Standards and certification fall short in terms of food safety, at least for the uncommitted. There is a need to develop aspects of the food chain to meet general food safety regulations and best practice within an organic standards framework, informing the development of certification, and also communicating assurance about standards to anxious, mistrustful consumers. That raises some deliberately provocative questions for discussion:

- *Is complexity of consumer attitudes irreducible?* For some consumers, 'organic' means 'quality', and attempts to improve it may undermine, or 'conventionalise' the underlying production frameworks.
- *Should we let consumers continue to believe that organic products are inherently safe?* Research which questions these beliefs may challenge the basis of demand for organic products at premium prices. Examining the quality and safety of organic foods in a conventional perspective might damage their inherent appeal.
- *Could technical and standards development be oriented towards short, local supply chains?* Standards development could encourage, for example, maximum food miles in processing and distribution; or safety and quality enhancement regimes which are appropriate for small-scale enterprises.
- *How can divergent concerns of 'old' and 'new' consumers be addressed at the same time?* While there is some overlap between market segments there are obvious dissonances: what turns 'old' consumers on can be a turn-off for 'new' consumers. Any median strategy might alienate both groups.
- *How does improved consumer information affect 'new' and 'old' consumers?* An important element of Organic Action Plans is improvement of consumer information. Does increased knowledge of the framework of organic production deepen commitment (implicit in the policy) or is commitment an precursor to finding out more?

The meanings of 'natural', and 'authentic' for consumers and food specialists need to be carefully reassessed, particularly with regard to technical development and policy innovation.

Acknowledgement

Financial support from the Commission of the European Communities for Integrated Project No. 50635 (QLIF) is acknowledged. This paper does not necessarily reflect the Commission's views or anticipate the Commission's future policy in this area.

Reference

Midmore, P., Naspetti, S., Sherwood, A-M., Vairo, D., Wier, M. and Zanoli, R. (2005): "Consumer attitudes to quality and safety of organic and low input foods: a review", (Aberystwyth: University of Wales), available from www.qlif.org.