

Chapter 24

Contributing to a Transition to Sustainability of Agri-Food Systems: Potentials and Pitfalls for Organic Farming

Ika Darnhofer

Abstract Organic farming is built on systemic principles that include environmental as well as social and political aims. Indeed, the aims are to produce wholesome food in an environmentally-friendly way, as well as to contribute to social justice, e.g., by preserving the family farm and rural communities. However, as organic farming has grown out of its niche, a broad range of practices have emerged. The current diversity is partly a result of internal processes and partly a result of its involvement with the dominant agri-food system. In fact, as a result of its involvement with the agri-food system, organic farming attempts to modify it by resisting its reductionist logic. As such, organic farming could be conceived of as being in a co-evolutionary dance with the dominant agri-food system: being changed by it, as well as contributing to its transition to sustainability. It is argued here that if organic farming is to serve as a prototype for sustainable agriculture, it will not only have to show that it can produce high-quality food in an environmentally-friendly way, but also demonstrate its ability to work with and induce a transformation of the rest of the food chain (including food handling, marketing and consumption). To achieve this, it will have to reintegrate and better articulate issues related to economic sustainability and social justice, possibly through alliances with other alternative food systems.

Keywords Conventionalisation • Evolving practices • Adaptability • Systemic approach • Social equity • Public health • Economic viability • Alternative practices • Co-evolution • Co-construction

24.1 Introduction

Organic farming is usually understood as a systemic approach to agriculture and food production. It is associated with ecological aspects such as nutrient cycling, social aspects such as the preservation of family farms and providing nutritious foods to consumers, as well as economic aspects that ensure the viability of the farm

I. Darnhofer (✉)

Department of Economic and Social Sciences, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Feistmantelstr. 4, 1180 Vienna, Austria
e-mail: ika.darnhofer@boku.ac.at

as a cornerstone of rural areas (Woodward et al. 1996). These aims are reflected in the four principles of organic agriculture formulated by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM): health, ecology, fairness and care (Luttikholt 2007). Organic farming would thus seem to be well positioned to be a prototype for sustainable agriculture, the proposition that is the underlying rationale of this book.

To contribute to this proposition, I clarify its various terms. Firstly, I would like to define the term ‘organic farming’ by pointing out that it seems helpful to differentiate between organic farming *principles* as an ideal, and the diversity of organic farming *practices*. This diversity has been highlighted within the framework of the conventionalisation debate, which I will briefly review. Secondly, it seems helpful to clarify how comprehensively the term ‘sustainability’ is meant: does it refer primarily to the environmental impact on-farm, or does it have a wider meaning all along the agro-food chain? The specific issues linked to sustainability have evolved over time, and organic farming—at least in its present form—might not be able to address them all equally. Finally, I clarify the meaning of ‘prototype’ by assessing whether this refers to a set of standardised practices, or whether it includes a dynamic component that allows organic farming to co-evolve with its context. I propose that for organic farming to contribute to a transition to sustainability (i.e., to transform the dominant agro-food regime), it might have to be reflexive and harness its internal diversity while building alliances with other alternative movements.

24.2 Conventionalisation and the Diversity of On-Farm Practices

Organic farming has made substantial contributions to various aspects of environmental sustainability, especially regarding on-farm production methods. While these contributions are acknowledged, it has also been pointed out that on-farm practices are very diverse, so that these potential environmental benefits are not necessarily achieved in each and every case. The observed heterogeneity of on-farm practices has been characterised as ranging from ‘input substitution’ to ‘system redesign’ (Lamine and Bellon 2009; Hill 2014 Chap. 22). Thus, while at one end of the spectrum, organic farmers redesign their whole farm over time in an ongoing effort to implement a holistic understanding of organic farming, on the other end, farmers implement only limited changes, in effect substituting prohibited for allowed inputs. As a result, on some organic farms, production practices differ only marginally from conventional practices. These observations have spurred a scientific debate around the ‘conventionalisation’ of organic farming (Guthman 2004; Lockie and Halpin 2005; Rosin and Campbell 2009).

The conventionalisation debate has highlighted the diversity within organic farming, pointing out that organic practices are not necessarily associated with the principles underlying organic farming. Instead, there is a common core, which is de-