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"Uneven processes of rural change"

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Insights from the trajectories of organic farming in Austria, Italy, and France

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INTRODUCTION

Organic farming is dominant in the public discourse, although it covers only 6.2% of the total Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA) in the EU-28. It is summoned in various contexts, be it as food that is free of pesticide-residues, as promoting animal welfare, as protecting the water from nitrates, as preserving biodiversity, as a way to support traditional farming, and as protecting the climate through lower energy-use.

Of all the 'alternatives' in agriculture, it is also the only one that has a dedicated regulation at EU-level, where Action Plans have been drafted by the Commission and by the Member States, and where dedicated measures to support its development are included in the agri-environment programmes of many Member States. Yet, despite the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and an EU-wide regulation for organic farming since 1991, it is striking that the share of UAA that is certified organic is very different in the EU: in 2015 it ranged from 1.5% in Ireland, to 20.3% in Austria.

In this contribution we review the literature that has analysed the causes of these differences. We then focus on three countries: Austria (20.3% of UAA certified organic), Italy (with 12.3% UAA certified organic) and France (with 4.8% UAA certified organic). In analysing the trajectory of the organic sector in these three countries, we focus on three relational dynamics: the national discourses around organic, i.e. how it is framed and how it evolved in the general political and agri-food discourses; how organic actors managed to enrol other actors and thus secure resources to further develop the sector; and how the trajectory was shaped by dynamics internal to the organic movement and the relationship between the movement and conventional farming. We close by discussing the relevance of the insights derived from the three organic trajectories, to understand transitions to sustainable agro-food systems.

STATE OF THE ART

In the early 1990s, the Council Regulation (EEC) 2019/91 was issued primarily to protect consumers from fraud and to ensure a fair competition between producers. Yet, by defining what can be certified as 'organic', the Regulation also enabled direct payments within the Second Pillar of the CAP (Regulation (EEC) 2078/92). Numerous studies have shown that there is a wide variation in how Member States have implemented Reg. 2078/92, highlighting that the development of the area of certified organic farming was influenced e.g. by the level of payments, the design and funding of accompanying measures (research, training, extension services), and the consistency in the policy commitment to organic farming in consecutive CAP programming periods.

Other studies show that organic farming had a stronger development where the supply and the demand-side were tackled simultaneously. Here too public policies played an important role, through legislation enabling direct marketing, funding for information and promotional campaigns, as well as through public procurement policies, e.g. mandating a minimum share of organic food in public kitchens. The demand-side was also strengthened in those countries, where organic farming built alliances with retail chains, thus reaching more consumers than would be possible through direct marketing alone.

Further studies focus on the regional spread of organic farms, pointing out that organic farming is often most widespread in 'less favoured areas' where extensive production practices and traditional farming structures dominate. Indeed, these are less amenable to productivity gains through the use of 'modern' production practices and thus more likely to adopt 'alternatives'.

While the above approaches focus on structural aspects, some studies take a discourse analytic approach. Discourses are socially-shared frames that al-

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low to give meaning to 'facts'. They re-order understandings, define what is a valid statement, and thus how problems, their causes and acceptable solutions can be formulated. How organic farming is framed by various actors thus has an important influence on which alliances between are feasible, and how political support can be justified. This is a sensitive issue, as agricultural policy is deeply involved in the support for modernised, intensive conventional agriculture, and organic farming was initially developed in overt criticism to this productivist agriculture. The challenge for policy makers was thus to support organic farming without this support implicitly or explicitly being construed as a critique of conventional agriculture.

RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

Taking a relational approach to understanding the trajectory of organic farming in Austria, Italy, and France, we analyse how various aspects relate to each other over time. We focus on three main dynamics: i) national discourses around agriculture generally and how organic was framed by the mainstream policy actors, i.e. which linkages were (not) made to rural development, food quality, and environmental protection; ii) the extent to which the organic movement was able to capture resources to further the development of organic farming, e.g. through direct payments for organic farmers, but also funds for research, education, and extension services; iii) the internal dynamics of the organic movement, its relationship with key actors of conventional farming and its ability to build linkage with actors along the food chain.

RESULTS

In Austria organic farming saw its largest development in the years before EU accession (in 1995). Policy support for organic farming was framed as a way to continue supporting traditional farms in remote mountain areas. These farms were seen as 'almost organic anyway'. The Federal Ministry of Agriculture linked organic farming with rural development, thereby downplaying the difference between extensive conventional farming and organic farming. This enabled the policy to be supported by the key players of conventional agriculture (i.e. the dominant farmers' union and the Chamber of Agriculture). The demand for organic food was tackled by Länder requiring a share of organic food in public kitchens, justifying this support in terms of environmental protection. Demand was also strengthened by an early collaboration with a major retail chain, which positioned organic food as 'Austrian' and thus appealed to consumers patriotism against 'cheap' imports after the borders were opened upon EU accession. Since the early

2000s the share of organic UAA has grown slowly but steadily, building on well-established marketing chains, strong demand by consumers, and a continued, steady support from agricultural policy.

In Italy, a major impediment to policy support in the late 1990s, was lack of concerted action. For ex., while the national government earmarked funds for organic farming in national and regional parks, they were not used due to a lack of legislation at regional level. At the same time some regional governments issued laws to support of organic farming, but they were not enforced due to lack of funds. Moreover, the organic movement was internally divided, with several regions having their own organic standards. Since the 2000s, organic farming developed, as it was seen as a way to valorise regional foods, to develop bio-districts, and it received support e.g. through inclusion in school meals.

In France, the strong commitment to a productivist agriculture curtailed effective policy support for organic farming. Institutionalisation was weak and only limited funds were made available. The organic movement was marked by internal conflicts, which contributed to organic farming being marginalized in national debates. While some conflicts could be overcome, tensions remain, e.g. regarding the strategies and cooperation that are seen as suitable to promote organic farming.

CONCLUSION

The trajectories of organic farming are the results of a complex interplay of many factors. To understand a trajectory, it is key to acknowledge that 'organic farming' is construed differently by different actors, and the key question is whether these discourses can be aligned. This may be most effective if the difference between organic and conventional farming is downplayed, as this enables organic farming to be positioned alongside conventional farming, rather than in opposition to it. However, it might undermine the transformative potential of organic farming. Indeed, organic farming is a holistic approach, fundamentally building on the notion that the health of the soil, plants, animals and humans are interdependent. Taking this understanding seriously would deeply transform the agrofood system.

The trajectories of organic farming show that it is very difficult to overcome path dependencies, esp. the strongly sectoral organisation of agriculture, with at best weak linkages between agricultural production, environmental protection, and healthy nutrition. To be able to capture resources and thus grow, alternatives must present a novel narrative enabling them to build new alliances.

For references see full paper